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THE DIVINE PARABLE OF HISTORY



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# THE DIVINE PARABLE OF HISTORY

*A CONCISE EXPOSITION OF THE REVELATION  
OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE.*

BY

H. ARTHUR SMITH, M.A.,  
OF THE MIDDLE TEMPLE, BARRISTER-AT-LAW.

Διδασκάλου γὰρ τοῦτό ἐστι, μὴ ἂν βούλεται ὁ μαθητὴς  
ἀλλ' ἂν συμφέρεи μαθεῖν διδάσκειν.

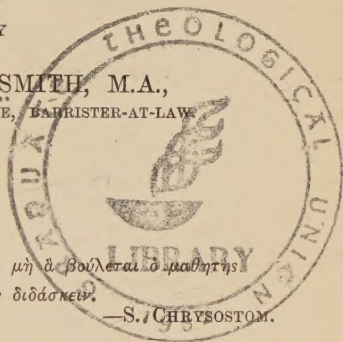
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To  
The Very Reverend C. J. Vaughan, D.D.  
Dean of Llandaff

This Little Book

Is by his Kind Permission  
Respectfully and Gratefully

Dedicated

In Recognition of the Help received from his  
“Lectures on the Revelation of St. John”

and

Through his Ministry in the  
Temple Church

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## PREFACE.

---

NO one is more sensible than the writer of the temerity of the attempt to elucidate the teaching of a Prophecy, respecting which the opinions of learned and illustrious expositors have always been in conflict. In the presence of the many divergent interpretations strongly supported, one can seldom venture to speak with confidence; and if in the pages which follow there is sometimes an appearance of boldness or finality in the form of expression, it must suffice to say, once for all, by way of disclaimer and explanation, what it would necessarily have been wearisome to have been continually repeating, that the interpretation here presented is but put forth suggestively, as that which seems most entitled to confidence.

It is perhaps needless to say that the writer



makes no pretence to originality in the general line of exposition adopted. What is known as the "resumptive theory" is certainly as old as the fourth century; and since it was then elaborated by Tyconius it has been repeatedly restated with more or less variation of detail; as, for instance, by St. Augustine and St. Bede in mediæval times, and amongst the moderns by Hengstenberg, Alford, Milligan, and Vaughan. So far as the writer is aware, however, there is no work which puts the case in quite so narrow a compass or with quite the same purpose in view as that which is now presented.

It will be observed that, for the assistance of readers, not only have the passages dealt with in the several chapters been indicated at their head, but that quotations from the sacred text have been printed in Clarendon type. In these quotations neither the Authorised nor the Revised Version has been uniformly adopted. Occasionally an independent translation has been ventured on. Perhaps it would have been advantageous to have further indicated the closeness of the comments by a yet more copious incorporation of the Scripture words. The desire for concise-



ness has often been in conflict with that for clearness, but it is hoped that the medium course chosen will be deemed a happy one. To ensure, however, an adequate appreciation of the accuracy of many passages in which the method of paraphrase is adopted in preference to that of quotation, readers are earnestly advised to have the Prophecy itself at hand for reference as they read. If no other end is gained than that of encouraging perusal afresh of words so pregnant with instruction and consolation, the labour will not have been in vain.

H. A. S.

CLAPHAM, *November 1895.*







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# THE DIVINE PARABLE OF HISTORY.



## INTRODUCTION.

IT has often been commented on as a matter of significance, that the writer of the strange Scriptures which we are about to examine has more than once uttered a special promise of blessing on those who read and keep the words of this prophecy (Rev. 1: 227). It would seem as if, conscious of the complexity and difficulty of the records to which he was giving utterance, he anticipated a day in which many readers would be tempted to turn from his page as from something bewildering and even inscrutable, and therefore unprofitable; as if, under the conviction that a yielding to this temptation would result in a great loss of instruction, of warning, and of comfort, he had felt impelled to preface his work with an emphatic benediction,



inviting to perseverance in prayerful reading, and to conclude it with a like exhortation to those discouraged with a first perusal, stirring them up to read and pray again. Under the influence of these repeated invitations, I have devoted much time to the careful scrutiny of these visions, and, as a result, I have no hesitation in bearing testimony to the truth of the prophet's promise. There is blessing in his word. Of it, it is no less true than of any Scripture, that "it is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3<sup>16</sup>). But in order that it may be found to be so, it is above all things necessary that it should be read with a docile heart, and with a practical end in view. There certainly is in these chapters very much which is calculated to stimulate the curiosity of the natural understanding, and immense labour and research has been expended in the attempt to deduce from them some answer to the ever-present and ever-interesting questions as to "the times and seasons" in which God's purposes shall be fulfilled. It is easy to sympathise with the feeling which has prompted this method of study: to do so is indeed to join in the cry of the souls of the martyred dead beneath the altar (Rev. 6<sup>10</sup>). Yet there are many texts



which warn us that however natural this great interrogation may be, we are not to expect in this life a solution of the difficulty which prompts it. It will be necessary, in the pages which follow, often to refer to the temptation to pruriency which is ever at hand in the reading of these prophecies; and it may therefore suffice at this point to say that I propose, in the study of them, to concentrate thought not so much on the revelation of the future which they may contain, as on the message which they have for us in the present. It is true that, like the oral teaching of the Christ, they have much to say of things which are to come in time and in eternity; but it seems more than doubtful whether it was ever the main purpose of prophecy to disclose the secrets of the future. It is noteworthy that the Master more than once called back the minds of His disciples, when they were disposed to wander into the regions of the unknown, to the consideration of present privileges and present duty. It is probably as true in our days as it was in theirs, that it is not for men "to know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in His own power" (Acts 17). We shall therefore strive to read in the spirit which cries, "What wilt Thou have me to do?" rather than that which inquires,



“When shall these things be?” In other words, we shall read in the hope of receiving practical guidance in the life of holiness, rather than in that of satisfying a merely intellectual curiosity. Isaac Williams has well said, that “when the seer, instead of waiting for what should be spoken, turned to see Him who spoke, he set us an example of how we should study his book.”

This being so, it follows that it will be necessary to devote but little time to the consideration of certain weighty and difficult questions which in a treatise purporting to be exhaustive would require minute examination. For instance, it is well known that from the second century to the present the authorship of the book has been a matter of acute controversy. The evidence, internal and external, has been minutely sifted over and over again; the claims of St. John the Apostle and of a hypothetical John the Elder have been weighed one against the other with scrupulous care, and many ingenious theories have been propounded and maintained. But it would be entirely foreign to our design now to enter into a discussion, the terms of which probably never have been and never will be more fairly or more acutely set forth than they were by St. Dionysius of Alexandria more than 1600 years ago. Those who are interested in it will have



no difficulty in finding materials for the pursuit of the study. For our purpose, it must suffice to say that we see no sufficient reason to doubt the opinion which has in all ages prevailed in the Catholic Church, and which identifies the revealing seer with the disciple whom Jesus loved.

The date of the composition is perhaps of even more importance than the authorship in its bearing on the interpretation; and here again we are in the presence of an apparently interminable dispute. Assuming the common authorship of the Johannine writings, it is doubtless a question of the greatest nicety to decide whether this book was written before the gospel and epistles, or later, under the reign of Domitian, in the writer's extreme old age. Much space would be necessary even for the adequate presentation of the arguments on either side. But for this we must again refer the student to works whose purpose it is to give instruction on such matters; and we will content ourselves with the mere statement that, though by no means unconscious of the strength of the case on the other side, we shall assume the production of this prophecy to have taken place at the earlier of the two dates which are commonly placed in opposition; that is to say, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70,



either under or very soon after the reign of the persecuting Nero.

If these assumptions be correct, it is not difficult to picture to ourselves the circumstances, and even the state of mind, of the prophet when the series of wondrous visions here recorded burst upon him. He was a Galilean Jew; and that is tantamount to saying that he was one not only devoted by early training to a loving appreciation of the Hebrew religious system, but, in addition, imbued with an ardent patriotism,—one who in all probability had, in early life at least, entertained sanguine political hopes respecting the future of his nation. Certainly both his religious and his political ideas had been revolutionised by his association with Christ. He had learned from his Master, slowly indeed but thoroughly, that the kingdom which He came to set up was to be a kingdom not of this world: that the religion He came to establish was not one of types and ordinances, but one of purely moral and spiritual import. In common with his fellow-apostles, he had devoted himself, with all the intensity of his impassioned nature, to the proclaiming of this kingdom and the preaching of this religion. The promises of the Lord—promises of abiding presence and of assured victory—were ever ringing in his ears. He had



experienced that enduing with power from on high for which he, with his brethren, had been bidden to tarry awhile at Jerusalem. He had witnessed a glorious earnest of success at Pentecost, and, undismayed by virulent opposition, he had pressed forward in the work, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and the encouragement of long-sustained success.

But now more than thirty years had passed away. The best of his earthly life had been spent. Most of the early companions of his toil had been taken—many through martyrdom—from the scene of conflict. The new kingdom and the new religion had at length stirred up against them an opposing power mightier far than that Jewish resistance with which he had contended in the early days, and had helped to overcome. The Church may well have seemed to human eyes to have met more than its match in the might of imperial Rome. And, what was worse, there was ever before his mind the knowledge of growing corruption within as well as of ruthless resistance without. Banished as he was to Patmos, cabined and confined within the narrow limits of a barren isle, it was no longer possible for him to overcome despondency, as it has often been overcome, by ceaseless energy of work. It would be little wonder if a combination of cir-



cumstances so untoward should weigh his spirits down, and prove a severe testing-time for faith, however strong, and for hope, however bright.

Moreover, influences such as these, which he in his strength may have been able to resist, were doubtless more oppressive and dangerous to multitudes of his fellow-believers than they were to him. Many in becoming Christians had by no means ceased to be Jews. Even when Christ crucified was no longer a stumblingblock to them, they still clung to their old patriotic dreams, and trusted in some vague way that the power of the new kingdom would prevail to restore the visible throne of David, and confer on the second temple a temporal glory greater than that of the first. There were also, we may be sure, thousands of Christians, sincere but weak, who were prepared to sustain a good fight up to a certain point,—to bear a cross up to a certain weight,—but whose faith was unequal to the strain of a lifelong conflict, a long-enduring resistance unto blood, striving against sin. Evil days, indeed, had come upon all; and yet worse were swiftly coming. Jerusalem itself was all but compassed with armies. False prophets were deceiving many; iniquity abounded; and the love of many was waxing cold. It is true that all these things, and worse than these,



had been foretold (Matt. 24, Luke 21); but we surely can all realise what a very different thing it was to read those prophecies as referring to a state of things distant or future, and to live in the midst of the terror and anguish of their fulfilment. The time was indeed a time already of pain and of peril, and was not destined to pass quickly away. Never before had the Church seemed in such dire need of Divine intervention and Divine encouragement.

The book before us tells us how the intervention came, how the encouragement was given. In reading every page and every verse of it, we shall have to remember that it came as a message to a generation grievously perplexed and distressed, when men's hearts were "failing them for fear." What it was then, it has potentially been ever since to all that are troubled, as its first hearers were troubled, by the mystery of Providence, all but crushed as many of its first readers were by the extreme stress of a fight more than commonly severe. We live in days in which its voice again is sorely needed. Perhaps we are approaching days in which this need will yet increase. It is opportune for us to turn, then, to the words of this prophecy, if so be that we too may hear in them the voice of the Son of God, and see in them a revelation, an unveil-



ing of Jesus Christ. The glorious salutation with which the writer commended his vision to the seven churches, which stand as a type of the whole Church of God militant here in earth, is still a living voice: Grace be unto you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful Witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father: to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen (ch. 14-6).



## CHAPTER I.

### THE VISION OF THE GLORIFIED CHRIST.

(Ch. 19-20.)

**I** JOHN, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day. With these brief words of preparation the seer abruptly introduces his record of revealing vision. The words justify what has been already said as to his depression, and that of the readers whom he was about to address. They speak of a common sadness, but also of an isolation all his own. He is already a victim of the tyranny which threatens all, a confessor for the gospel's sake. His reflections are on these present and impending woes, on a threatened temple, an imperilled Zion. It is the Lord's day, mentioned as being already well



known and consecrated to special devotion and holy observance by the memories of Resurrection and of Pentecost. By the lonely shore he is striving to realise what the words meant, "Lo! I am with you always." His prayer is heard; he does realise "the communion of the Holy Ghost"; he is "in the Spirit"; and suddenly he hears behind him a deep note of majestic music, a sound as of the silver trumpets which in earlier days he had been wont to hear summoning the congregation to the temple prayers (Num. 102). But the sound is now articulate: it is a voice, even a familiar voice; and at once it speaks of familiar names, of churches in which St. John had often taught, which had been under his special pastoral oversight and care. He had mourned for them, suffering and in peril through want of a guidance which he could no longer give; and now he is suddenly reminded that these churches are the objects of the solicitude of a greater than he; that they are watched over and scrutinised by an all-searching eye, guarded by an Almighty arm. Already the great lesson of the book has begun,—the lesson of the real abiding existence of the risen Saviour, of His generally undreamt-of nearness to and concern for His people; that He is indeed the Shepherd and Bishop of souls.



Turning to see the voice, the apostle was yet again reminded of the temple and its furniture. He saw seven golden candlesticks (cf. Ex. 25<sup>37</sup>). We perceive in this feature of the vision, this reminiscence of the ritual of worship so hallowed in the mind of every devout Hebrew, the beginning of another lesson, which is continued in almost every chapter of the book, a lesson which is here taught by reiterated symbolism, as it is in the Epistle to the Hebrews by elaborate exposition,—the lesson, in short, that the Jewish ordinances were but “patterns of things in the heavens,”—the lesson, inconceivably comforting in that age, and instructive for every age, that the cause of God was not dependent upon the maintenance or preservation of any earthly institution, however excellent, nor upon the continued consecration of any place, however hallowed. The trumpets, the candlesticks, the altars of sacrifice and of incense, the censers, the cherubim of gold, all these things were soon to be swept away from Jerusalem by the rude hands of Roman conquerors, but St. John beholds them all in heaven, where they are purified with better sacrifice than that of bulls and goats (Heb. 9<sup>23</sup>). His heart must have been uplifted at the very thought, into a region where anxious care could not follow. What mattered the fate of the gold



and silver, graven by art and man's device, if the Christ is seen standing in the midst of the candlesticks, or ministering before the altar in the heavens? In short, all confidence and strength is given by the very knowledge of His presence, and that the work of caring for and leading the Church to victory is His and not man's. So St. John is now taught, and with him all who are of doubtful mind. He sees his Lord standing once more upon the earth, but radiant now with heavenly glory.

Twice before in the New Testament records we read of visions of the Risen One. St. Stephen, in the hour of His martyrdom, beheld Him standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7<sup>56</sup>), risen for a while in that place where, in another scripture (Heb. 1<sup>3</sup>), we read that He sat down, as if in token of His sympathy with, or as if in readiness to welcome the spirit faithful unto death. St. Paul, again (Acts 9<sup>3ff.</sup>), beheld Him shining with a brightness which eclipsed the noonday sun, and heard from His own lips that call which was to send him forth, the greatest of the apostles. Both are proofs of the watchfulness of Christ. Here, before us, is a third and yet more ample proof, if proof we need, that His words are true: **I am alive for evermore** (v. 18). "I am with you always." Here the prophet



beholds Him clad in kingly raiment, His brow white with the splendour of holiness, His eyes as fire to discern every thought of men's hearts, His feet as burnished brass for endurance and strength. **His voice was as the sound of many waters**, as was that of Israel's God when He appeared to Israel's apocalyptic seer (Ezek. 43<sup>2</sup>); massive, awe-inspiring to all who will listen, yet easily forgotten and unregarded by those whose whole attention is centred on lesser sounds. **In His right hand were seven stars, and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword**, the well-known symbol of that Word which is "quick and powerful . . . piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4<sup>12</sup>). Hitherto the imagery of the vision has been, in a measure, the imagery of night, with its imperfect illumination of lamps and stars and the burning furnace. **But His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.** He is the Day-Star which hath arisen to flood the earth with the glory that excelleth, and which is to replace the dimmer dispensation that was passing away.

What wonder that the apostle fell at His feet as dead! So it has ever been when man has been suffered to gaze on even the tempered rays



of the Divine glory. So had Daniel (8<sup>17</sup> 10<sup>15</sup>) and Ezekiel (1<sup>28</sup> 43<sup>3</sup> 44<sup>4</sup>) and Isaiah (6<sup>5</sup>) and Moses (Ex. 3<sup>6</sup>) been overwhelmed by visions sent in mercy. We shall read later on of the yet more terrible aspect and effect of that countenance when it is revealed in wrath. Now He wills to speak "as a man to his friend," and He restores with a touch that consciousness and reverent boldness which the brightness of His Presence had for a moment displaced. He laid His right hand on the seer. He convinces him of His continuing humanity, as in the days of His risen life He had convinced and soothed those whom His spiritual appearance had terrified and affrighted (Luke 24<sup>37, 39</sup>). His first words are the same which the apostle had heard from the same lips long before on the Sea of Galilee, when His appearance on the waves had caused the Twelve to cry out for fear (Matt. 14<sup>27</sup>). Countenance, touch, and voice all combine to convince the seer that it is the *Lord's* very self. He is prepared for the announcement, **I am He that liveth, and was dead.**

It is significant that in this chapter the same words having reference to the old *Jehovah* Name are applied first to the Divine Father (1<sup>4, 8</sup>), then to the glorified Son (v. 17), who is His



express image,—the Word which was in the beginning with God, and which was God. This assertion of the perfect Godhead, combined as it is with this manifestation of the glorified manhood, we may regard as an important part of the purpose of this revelation of Jesus Christ. Already the wisdom of this world was at work in the Church, and was beginning to busy itself with bold speculations as to the relations of the Persons in the Divine Trinity, and particularly as to the nature of the Christ. St. John, in the salutation which prefaces his work, and which we have already quoted, expressly recognises the triune nature, as if anxious at the earliest moment to give expression to the truth once more forced on his mind by the very words of the Lord's first address. The words of the prophecy, on the reading and keeping of which he pronounces his blessing, are not his words, but the words of the Godhead, speaking in the Person of the Son. He is bidden to write what he sees, and what he is to see and hear, as a message from heaven to earth; and the very first words of it are, as it were: "**I am alive for evermore**"; "**I and My Father are one**"; "**I have overcome the last enemy,**" "**and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.**" "**I have power, therefore, to give** 'deliverance to the captives of Death,' 'to set



at liberty them that are bruised' for a while by his chains. I have 'become the first fruits of them that slept.' "

It is not often in this book that the symbols which it sets before us are divinely interpreted. Generally it is left for us to read the riddle, that ours may be the reward of those who have patience to search the Scriptures. But here we have an exception to the usual rule. There is a present work, an immediate commission, to be delivered to the apostle; and that he may be roused from his bewilderment to a clear apprehension of the duty before him, the command to write the vision is straightway followed by an explanation of the types which he beholds: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches; and the seven candlesticks are seven churches. The churches have been already named, and will presently be more fully described. The "angels of the churches" is an expression which need cause us no perplexity. It is true that some interpreters, influenced by the fact that, in the epistles which succeed, the "angels" are identified with the churches in a manner which is difficult to understand if the word is intended to designate the bishop or minister, have supposed that the word refers to some superhuman beings standing in a mysterious



and intimate relation to the churches. But surely such an interpretation raises quite as many difficulties as it removes. That the angels of heaven are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation," we indeed read elsewhere (Heb. 1<sup>14</sup>); but that these spirits are subject to censure, liable to suffer loss by reason of the shortcomings of congregations over which they watch, is an idea so absolutely unsustained by other scriptures, that only in great extremity should we be disposed to adopt it. On the other hand, the application of the term "angel" to a human minister was familiar to Hebrew thought. Haggai was designated "the Lord's angel" (Hag. 1<sup>13</sup>). In Malachi (2<sup>7</sup>) the term is used to describe the priests of the Lord. In Eccles. 5<sup>6</sup> we apparently have another similar instance; and yet more striking is its application to St. John the Baptist (Luke 7<sup>27</sup> Gr.). Further, the word was in St. John's day in familiar use as designating the minister of the Jewish synagogue. The more natural sense seems to be that which has been commonly adopted, namely, that the word "angel" here denotes the presiding pastor, or bishop. Of the special difficulty which is supposed to militate against this rendering it will be necessary to speak hereafter.



The revelation, then, of the vision itself, immediately to be amplified in words, is one of the watchfulness and abiding guardianship of the Lord. He is in the midst of His Church; its ministers are in His hand. Nothing could be more apt than the choice of this chapter as the proper lesson for Easter morning. It strikes the keynote of the whole book in setting forth the great thought of Easter: "He is risen, He is not here." What other word of hope was possible to a Church struggling for existence, as the Church was struggling then? What other word is possible to a Church struggling for mastery, as the Church is struggling now? What other inspiration is sufficient for the endurance and the conflict before us? There is something of beauty, something which moves our sympathy, in the sad despairing love of the Unitarian or humanitarian, who comes to the tomb on Easter morn bringing sweet spices like Mary and Salome for His anointing; but to those rejoicing in the Risen One, how very, very pitiful! "Why seek ye the living among the dead?" "I am alive for evermore." There is comfort, there is victory in the words. They may be to us but as a legend of the nursery, or as the motto of the tomb; a mere breathing of a pious hope, or a half-plaintive, half-querulous aspira-



tion. If so, our arms will be too paralysed for the sword and the warfare of the kingdom of God. We must have the Captain in our midst. The whole prophecy now before us reveals His very presence. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."



## CHAPTER II.

### THE EPISTLES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES.

(Chs. 2 and 3.)

WE have already observed that the seven cities named by the Saviour in His first trumpet-call to the prophet bore names familiar to him. St. John had laboured almost certainly in them all; had indeed, in all probability, had a greater share than anyone else in founding and fostering Christianity in many of them. While, then, to us they are names which suggest nothing definite without the exercise of diligent investigation and an effort of imagination, to him they recalled a thousand clearly remembered scenes of his ministering life. The "angels" of the churches were doubtless in some, if not in all cases, his personal friends, his converts, his pupils in the faith. The conditions of their labour and responsibility were well known to him. He could at once picture to



himself the humble sanctuaries in which they preached and prayed, often overshadowed by the lofty magnificence of idol shrines; he knew the little assemblies of worshippers, among whom were "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble" (1 Cor. 1<sup>26</sup>), and who, amidst their difficult and painful surroundings, always needed wise and patient guidance, and often stern rebuke and faithful exhortation. To him, therefore, this wonderful intervention of our Lord must have brought home a sense of the reality and closeness of the Divine Presence, of the minuteness of the Divine oversight, which we can scarcely realise, and can only approach by supposing the substitution of local names as familiar to us as those of Ephesus and Smyrna were to him. The effort needed for this will assuredly be richly rewarded if it only brings home to us the living conviction that Jesus Christ is still amongst us, still walking in the midst of the candlesticks, still holding the stars in His right hand, still searching into the deeds and thoughts of men with eyes of flame, still speaking words sharp as a two-edged sword.

No doubt the addresses of our Lord which St. John was bidden to record and send were primarily of particular application. This is obvious from the minuteness of detail which



they present in commendation, in warning, and in promise. None the less, however, it may be confidently affirmed that all His words have an application to the Church of all time. The seven churches are typical and representative of the one Church, which is itself the aggregate of all others. Is it necessary or even desirable to attempt to press the application further? There are some expositors who profess to see in the seven churches types of seven successive ages of the universal Church. The working out of such an idea inevitably involves much hazardous speculation. It imports something of an esoteric character into words which in themselves are very plain and simple; words which, taken in their natural sense, come very close home to the conscience. Moreover, if, before deciding which of the epistles especially concerns us, we are, as a preliminary enquiry, to determine in which of the hypothetical ages we live, we not only make a direct application conditional on the solution of a difficult problem, but in effect, or at least in a measure, we put from us the teaching of the rest. Now, one great principle to which I shall have often to refer in the following pages, and which I propose consistently to apply, is to be jealous of any and every interpretation which tends to limit to any one particular age or place



the application of the warnings and encouragements given in these prophecies. That many, if not most of them, have their particular local and temporary application, needs scarcely be said. Sometimes this is more obvious, sometimes less so ; but our wisdom will be always to enquire what they have to say to us here and now. Sometimes it may, perhaps, be difficult so to interpret the voice ; but the case before us is not one of these, and it seems purely gratuitous to distribute over several diverse ages these sentences of precious instruction from the Master's lips, every word of which admits of close personal application in every age. Ephesus is a warning to us as truly as Sardis or Laodicea ; Smyrna is a comfort as well as Philadelphia.

In one marked respect these second and third chapters differ widely from the rest of the book, and the difference cannot be without effect on their treatment in these pages. Speaking broadly, their teaching is so direct and so clear, that they are continually resorted to for the purposes of pulpit ministration. Every pregnant sentence in them is familiar as a household word. For practical purposes, we are justified in taking account of this familiarity, and in passing lightly over ground which expositors and preachers have already so diligently tilled. To



enter fully into every suggested subject might well occupy a volume. But many volumes have been written, very many more spoken on them already. No one, therefore, will have difficulty in finding abundant assistance for the further investigation of any of the details which may now be glanced at rather than expounded. Even a general view of passages so momentous will do more than serve the purpose of supplying a connecting link between the first vision on earth and the later visions in heaven. We shall be listening to our Saviour's words, almost His last words spoken on earth.

Looking, then, at these seven epistles as a whole, as in effect and in their practical present application one great comprehensive address to the one militant Church, we are first struck by the peculiar and orderly method of their construction. As there are seven messages, so each message admits of a sevenfold division.

I. First: each is prefaced with an express reference to some particular feature in the appearance and description of the Lord as seen and heard by the seer. We are taught that the language in the first chapter is not intended to convey a mere general idea of majesty and splendour, but that every detail has a specific interpretation which demands our thought.



Thus, in addressing the church of Ephesus, the word is declared to come from Him that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. Already the meaning of the candlesticks and of the stars has been divinely expounded. What strikes us in the choice of this description here, is the fact that these words really suggest a thought which applies not to Ephesus alone, but to all the churches. It is a description which, as it were, binds into one all the seven epistles. It is an exordium to them all. We may, perhaps, especially justify the selection of these descriptive words in this case by reference to the quasi-metropolitan position of Ephesus with regard to these seven cities. It was the greatest among them, and, to some extent at least, its church was the mother church of the district. In addressing it, therefore, there is a peculiar significance in the use of terms which set forth the Lord as the Lord of all the churches. The specific interpretation of the imagery brings into view what must have been to the apostle the great consoling thoughts of this and every apocalyptic vision: first, that whatever might be the weaknesses of this or the other human agent, the living Christ is still the Head, the Bishop of His Church; that, though using the instrumentality of men for the



evangelising of men, He has not in the remotest sense laid aside His office, or, let us say it reverently, put it into commission. He lives, He moves, in the midst; and, as we further see, not as a mere spectator, but as a Worker and a Guide. Again: the stars are in His hand. Their burdens are great, the care of the Church cometh upon them daily; and in their own strength they might well despair of bearing these weights. But the consoling thought which may be shared by every child of Christ is in a special sense theirs: "Underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33<sup>27</sup>). "Neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand" (John 10<sup>28</sup>).

Speaking to the church of Smyrna, He addresses them as **the first and the last, which was dead and is alive**; and the description is apposite to the message, which in brief is an exhortation to be faithful unto death, based on the promise of a crown of life. "It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2<sup>11, 12</sup>). If the command to such endurance as this is a hard saying, it comes from one who Himself descended for our sakes into the grave and gate of death, but who has conquered death and lives again, and is able to make us partakers of His victory.



The epistle to the church of Pergamos is from Him which hath the sharp sword with the two edges; and this figure is chosen because He speaks in reproof and threatening. In the case of Thyatira the reference is to the eyes of flame and the feet of brass, and the message again is one of warning; warning, moreover, we may observe, against the great secret sin, which human eyes may rarely detect; a message also exhorting to endurance unto the end, that they be not "weary in well-doing"; and bearing a promise of a power like unto His. To the church of Sardis, hardly living, ready to die, the Lord speaks of His possession of the seven Spirits, which stand, in view of His sevenfold attributes, for the one Spirit, who is the Lord and giver of life, and who is the Spirit of Christ no less than the Spirit of Him "who raised up Jesus from the dead" (Rom. 8 9, 11), "who proceedeth from the Father and the Son." The message to Philadelphia is from the holy and true, Him that hath the key of David, that openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth. The words are from Isa. 22<sup>22</sup>, where they are applied to Eliakim, the treasurer and chief minister in the kingdom, unto whom was committed the care of all its business. Again there is appositeness in this description as introductory



to an exhortation which speaks of an open door of opportunity, wherein strength, even though it be little, may be exercised. It is a reminder that what we are often wont to call chances are really the product of the Ruler's thought and care, that He places them in the way of those who have power and grace to use them. Lastly, the Lord's description is completed in the words by which His majesty and truth are declared to the church of the Laodiceans,—**The Amen** which confirms all the epistles, "The God of Amen," as the Hebrew describes Him in Isa. 65<sup>16</sup>, **the beginning of the creation of God**, or, as St. Paul expresses it, "the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1<sup>15</sup>), who through centuries of patience awaits the day when "He shall see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied," knocking at the heart's door of the lukewarm, speaking to the very last words of gracious invitation and promise.

Thus fully are the glorious attributes of the Church's Head and King set forth and expounded: All-sufficient in wisdom and in strength, Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1<sup>24</sup>). So He appeared in Patmos; in such character He addressed the churches then; so He is still, "the same yesterday, to-day, yea, and for ever," walking "in the midst of the candlesticks," scrutinising every heart and every



work, noting and rebuking every fault and weakness, yet not willing to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax; full of sympathy as of faithfulness, working through His ministers, and working with His ministers, loving His Church with an infinite love, sanctifying and cleansing it that He may "present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 527). The thought is the only sufficient inspiration, but it is an all-sufficient inspiration for the labour and the conflict to which He calls us.

II. The second feature common to all the epistles is the solemn assertion of the Lord's knowledge of the pastor's and the church's works. It is reiterated seven times, lest there should be any shadow of a doubt about it. "His eyes behold, His eyelids try the children of men" (Ps. 114). Sometimes the works only are named (31, 8, 15), but generally the expression is amplified. He has observed the work in detail, in all its conditions and circumstances. He commends the patience of one (22, 19), notes the tribulation and poverty of another (29), the special obstacles which beset another (213), the charity and faith of yet another (219). His knowledge is a searching know-



ledge, which regards motives as well as results, an all-inclusive knowledge, which leads to an infallible judgement such as no man can pronounce on the works of his fellow-man.

This is a fitting place in which to revert to a difficulty which has already been mentioned as attending the commonly accepted interpretation of the expression, "the angels of the churches," and which has led some to adopt what, I venture to think, is a strained and fanciful explanation. In form all these epistles are personally addressed to "the angels," not to the churches or congregations. In form the warnings and complaints are addressed to him who, in our interpretation, is the human pastor. On the other hand, all the promises are general : **To him that overcometh** ; and the exhortations are still more emphatically so : **He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.** It seems out of the question to attempt to divide the messages, to regard part as addressed to the pastor and part to his congregation. All that "the Spirit saith" must surely be read as having application to all that hear. Are we then to assume that the Judge attributes all the faults of the bishop to his church, or all the faults of the church to its bishop, or to conclude that perfectly faithful ministry must be uniformly



successful? How are we to understand such an apparent identification of the leader and the led as would justify the condemnation of the one for the faults of the other, or *vice versâ*? Viewing the words in the light only of grammar and of logic, there seems to be a difficulty. But, after all, is it not more apparent than real,—a matter rather of critical refinement than of substance? Generally speaking, all will admit that a church is likely to reflect the character of its minister. The rule, confirmed by all experience, is that faithful work has its reward, and brings forth good fruit. If a pastor finds his church cold and lifeless, or lukewarm and lax, it is wise counsel which bids him take it to heart, and diligently to examine himself as in the presence of God. Though no man has a right to judge him on such grounds, we know that God will judge justly. As a matter of fact, we do find saints of old closely identifying themselves with the sins of the people under their charge (Neh. 1æ, Jer. 91, Lam. *passim*). On the whole, then, there seems to be nothing which need be regarded as extraordinary or incongruous in our Lord's addressing the churches as represented, or as in a measure personified, by their bishops, especially when, reading the epistles as a whole, we are not left



in any manner of doubt but that their intention is to rebuke and commend not mainly the representatives, but the congregations, and through them to warn and to instruct the Church of all time.

III. A third element, which may be said to be a common feature in all the epistles, are the words of commendation. It is true that in one case, and only one,—that of the Laodiceans, for which people St. Paul had “a great conflict” (Col. 21),—there is nothing that can be construed as approbation; but, as far as the principle of what we may reverently call the Lord’s criticism is concerned, the exception is as instructive as the rule. We are taught that He loves to say “Well done”; that the eyes of flame search diligently for the good which is in man, and if they discern it not, yet “He is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3 9). None of the churches is so sternly rebuked, yet to none are the words of appeal so full of pathos as those which, by the painter’s and by the poet’s art, as well as by pulpit ministry, are so indelibly impressed on the memory of mankind: **Behold, I stand at the door and knock.** To none is the promise so full of the thought of perfect reconciliation and



intimate communion: To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne. In the case of Sardis, again, the words of praise are few. There were but few names even in Sardis which had not defiled their garments; but the Lord does not overlook them, as the eyes of man might well have done, amidst the prevalent backsliding and death. In every other case the encouragement comes first: the reproof, if reproof is needed, follows.

Thus Ephesus is commended not only for its patience and labour, but for its careful administration of discipline; and even after the words of warning the Master resumes His approval, as if careful lest any good thing should be forgotten, any merited praise withheld. The church at Smyrna was in grievous straits, troubled, poor, tempted, persecuted. Yet were its believers "rich," "rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him" (Jas. 25). "A weak church" we might call such a congregation now, were we to visit a humble sanctuary standing in the midst of teeming earthly riches and splendour, seemingly making next to no impression on the iniquity around. But the Lord sees no weakness in scant numbers and lowly station where faith is strong, and is struggling against fearful



odds to maintain purity of life and to uphold His honour. Pergamos, again, was a city where to fight the good fight was dreadful, even deadly work. It had witnessed the martyrdom of one of name indeed unknown to fame, uncelebrated by any record save this, but recorded in the Lamb's book of life. Yet neither fire and sword, nor the very presence of such malevolent iniquity as justified the description of "Satan's throne," had hindered that church from holding fast His name, from cleaving to all they had learned of Christ; and Christ gives the greater honour because of the greater stress under which it was earned. In Thyatira, again, He rejoices, before rebuking the evil thing, to commend their love and service and patience, and especially to note their success in the very point where Ephesus had failed. They had not lost their first love. They were growing in grace: the last works were more than the first. Next to Smyrna, Philadelphia stands the highest in commendation. It has a little strength; but the talents, though few, are being used, not buried; the strength is being exerted; there is an aggressive spirit which the Lord loves, however limited its means; and He promises them revival and deliverance.



There is profound encouragement in all these gracious words. They remind us not only of the patience and love, but of the generous justice of our Lord. A human estimate of a man or of a congregation of men, or of the work of a congregation, is apt to be merely arithmetical. We cast the balance between the good and bad, and praise or blame according as the first or last prevails. Not so our heavenly Overseer. He does not forget the few white garments, though the many may be soiled. He withholds not His praise though the work be a seeming failure, where it springs from love. He would fan the feeblest spark into a flame.

IV. Yet our Judge is faithful. As He never suffers the prevalence of evil to hide from His eyes such good as there is, He never overlooks what is evil for the sake of what is good. Of all the churches He has complaints to make; and yet scarcely of all. As there was one church which received no word of praise, so there was one against which no fault was urged. Against the unmitigated condemnation of Laodicea may be set the unqualified approbation of Smyrna. Again the exception gives emphasis to the rule, which is, that in the church we may generally expect to find wheat and tares growing together unto the harvest. The various rebukes are all



deeply instructive ; all, when fully understood, as closely applicable to every age as they were when they were uttered. Are there not churches still, which, notwithstanding a glorious history, an effective organisation, a careful administration of formal discipline, are in grievous peril like that of Ephesus, because they have left their first love ? “The loss of love, even without the accompanying loss of patience, of diligence, or of purity, demands repentance or prognosticates ruin.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote also St. Paul : “If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries, and all knowledge ; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13<sub>2</sub>). Let us not attempt to elude the warning by considering only its application to a community. The Church will never deserve the rebuke unless there be in it many whose very memories are a perpetual reproach. If memory raises a sigh in any breast, let him cherish it with all its pain : it is a godly sorrow, which worketh repentance (2 Cor. 7<sub>10</sub>).

Smyrna, as we have seen, received no rebuke, but Pergamos has a very solemn call to penitence. What were its besetting sins ? **The doctrine of Balaam,—the doctrine of the Nicolaitans,—**hateful to God, was tolerated there by man. What do

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Vaughan, *sub loco*.



these expressions signify? The first is practically explained by the speaker Himself; and a reference to history makes it fully clear. It was God's will concerning His ancient people to keep them separate. They were a chosen people; He would have them a peculiar people; He was jealous over them. So long as they were so, no curse could light on them. Balaam could not, though bribed with a house full of silver and gold, speak of them other than in blessing. But his crafty counsel wrought the curse which his lips could not pronounce. He taught Balak to encourage unlawful, unholy unions between Israel and Moab (Num. 31<sup>16</sup> 25<sup>1</sup>). Harlotry between Israel and the heathen was ruin to that separateness which was the condition of purity and strength. It requires no Œdipus to read and apply the parable. "Be not conformed to this world," wrote St. Paul to the Roman Christians (12<sup>2</sup>). "Come out from among them, and be ye separate," he says to them of Corinth (2 Cor. 6<sup>17</sup>); "Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers" (*ib.* v. 14). "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues," cries a heavenly voice in a later chapter of this book (18<sup>4</sup>). Israel was a type of the Church, and its history presents a continual warning against the deadly



peril of striving at once to be friends of God and of the world. In the ancient pagan Asiatic city the evil took the form of an unhallowed association with idolaters, and participation in the lasciviousness which everywhere accompanied idolatrous worship. It is needless to specify the forms which it takes to-day. The reproach of Christ has not ceased. Happy is he who, in the presence of the flaming eyes, can say that his conscience is void of offence in this matter; who recognises, and wholly acts on the recognition, that "the friendship of the world is enmity with God" (Jas. 44).

"The doctrine of the Nicolaitans" was a mischief of very similar practical effect. The name is said, by St. Clement of Alexandria, to have been derived from Nicolas the deacon (Acts 65), though there is no reason for ascribing to him the noxious heresy itself. It is probable that he was disposed to give prominence to the more ascetic side of Christianity, and was especially intolerant of all indulgent sin of the flesh. It is a curious example of the obstinate perversity of human nature, that it should have evolved anti-nomian principles out of this extreme severity. The process of reasoning seems to have been briefly this: Life is not possible without *some* indulgence of the flesh in the way of obedience



to appetite. Therefore such indulgence is necessary. But what is necessary cannot be sinful. Therefore indulgence of the flesh cannot be sinful. The fallacy is hollow enough, but we know too well that sensual desire is not critical of any excuse which will seem to justify it. The whole process is aptly illustrative of the working of that wisdom which knows not God. The result in the ancient Church wherever this phase of Gnosticism was tolerated, was an assertion of independence of the moral law which led to scandalous licentiousness. There are Nicolaitans to-day who, it may be, reason differently, and sin differently, but still contrive to draw solace from Christian truth, while they live unworthily of even the moral precepts of Moses. They "continue in sin that grace may abound" (Rom. 6 1).

The sins of Thyatira were in character the same as those of Pergamos,—association with idolatry, with the usual result (2 20). But in this case the rebuke implies the existence of a special moving cause,—the existence, the toleration of **that woman Jezebel**, who claimed to be a prophetess, but was a temptress of the foulest kind. There is much authority for reading the words, "thy wife Jezebel"; and it is quite possible that the denunciation has such a personal



character,—that the pastor of the church was “unequally yoked” with one who seduced him to sin and caused the “Israel of God” to sin, as Jezebel of old stirred up Ahab to work wickedness (1 Kings 21<sup>25</sup>), and set up the orgies of Baal-worship in his kingdom “above all that were before him.” Be this as it may, the language seems clearly to point to the existence of some malign personal and female influence which was at work in this church, and imperilling that growth in grace which it had not yet destroyed. In both respects Thyatira presents a contrast to Ephesus. Its last works were more than the first; yet it was in danger through laxity of discipline. Ephesus could **not** bear **them which were evil**, and cast out its false apostles, yet it had left its **first love**. The contrast has its lesson; and it is two-sided,—first, the futility of the soundest government in a church without fervent spirituality; secondly, that there is Divine power in spirituality notwithstanding weakness of government. Wise administration, be it observed, is not depreciated,—not to be regarded as a light or little thing. Ephesus is commended for it. The moral is, “These things ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Matt. 23<sup>23</sup>).

As we have already seen, Sardis was in worse



straits than any church yet named. Its condition needs little comment. Elsewhere the many were truly living unto God; the few were hindering and casting stumblingblocks by their pernicious lives and doctrines. Here the many were dead; the few only were not defiled. The words are very awful, but very plain. We all know what it means to have **a name to be living**, but to be dead. These "whited sepulchres"—fair in outward seeming, orthodox in profession, decorous in conventionalities, orderly in external life, ever disposed to thank God they are not as other men are—have always been in evidence in the Church. Perhaps of all influences theirs is the most dangerous, because the most insidious. We know the type: it is one towards which every Christian tends to revert in default of that watchfulness which is here enjoined. The great neglect which accelerates the degradation is the neglect of private prayer. Without this, all ordinances combined will fail to sustain life.

In Philadelphia, on the other hand, we have a church that is almost, if not wholly, blameless. Its strength was little, but, exerted as it was, it was sure to grow. Strangely enough, in this case, as in that of Smyrna the highly commended, reference is made to the same particular form of opposition,—the blasphemy of those which say



they are Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan. We can scarcely doubt that the reference is to some who were in fact children of Abraham after the flesh, but, whether forming a Judaising party in the church, or a persecuting band without, were far from the spirit of the "father of the faithful." In the days of His earthly life the Lord applied to their predecessors language just as strong (John 8<sup>44</sup>). St. Paul had much conflict with both species of opponents and hinderers (Acts 15<sup>1</sup>, 1 Thess. 2<sup>14</sup> ff.). The solemn vigour of their condemnation here reminds us of many warnings in the Lord's ministry; of the woes pronounced on Capernaum and Chorazin and Bethsaida; of the dreadful responsibility of living in the midst of privilege, but rejecting the truth; of the sin which "remaineth" awaiting judgement, in those who say "we see" (John 9<sup>41</sup>); of the "many stripes" with which that servant shall be beaten who "knew his Lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will" (Luke 12<sup>47</sup>). "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" (Heb. 10<sup>29</sup>).



There remains but Laodicea, a name which has passed into a proverb of reproach. Here again conscience is the best commentator. Of all characters offensive to Christ, that here described is represented as the most offensive. His language could not well be stronger. Of course, in a sense, the death of Sardis indicates a lower state than the lukewarmness of Laodicea. But then a feeling of pity is evoked by the aspect of death, which tends to silence the voice of reproach. But the lukewarm church is **rich**, is self-satisfied, is boastful. Its real wretchedness and misery and poverty and blindness and **nakedness** are pitiable enough, it is true; but presented as they are in the light of a supercilious conceit, they are exactly calculated to evoke from a judge such language of scathing irony as is here addressed to it. Alas! we are all too familiar with modern instances of the ancient delusion. If spiritual death is the certain result of a neglect of private prayer, no less surely is spiritual lukewarmness the certain result of the neglect of common prayer and Christian fellowship. "How can one be warm alone?" (Eccles. 411). The Preacher's question is something more than a metaphor. It expresses a profound truth. Zeal for the Lord is fomented by nothing more than by a



holy "assembling of ourselves together." The prayer-meeting was the natural preparation for Pentecost. It has prepared many a Pentecost since. There is ever need for exhortation on this head. The peril is the greatest that can befall a Church; and this the very record before us proves in a singular way. The two churches of the seven which are visited with severest condemnation are the only two as to which there is no mention of any particular or besetting sin of external difficulty, or of the prevalence of any marked heresy. Ephesus and Pergamos had to contend with Nicolaitans, Smyrna and Philadelphia with persecuting or formalising Jews, Thyatira with evil example in high places and the "deep things of Satan." Yet all are, in more or less degree, approved. Sardis and Laodicea, in spite of formal orthodoxy, in spite of, or must we say because of, their comparatively easy circumstances, are dead, or at the point of death, or worse than dead. There is much food for reflection in the fact.

And now, having briefly reviewed all these rebukes of Christ, do we not find the survey of the besetments and perils of the Church wonderfully complete? Is there a single element of danger, or principle of evil threatening us, which is not here indicated? Formality, sloth, pride,



false doctrine, loose discipline, lax conduct, selfishness of privilege, and whatever else we know to be destroying or corrupting,—all are noticed. The catalogue is all-comprehensive. Again the seven churches truly represent the one Church. Well do we read of these warnings: **He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.**

V. The fifth element common to all the epistles are the words of advice. These, again, we shall find to be as perfect in comprehensiveness as they are necessarily perfect in wisdom and in love; always apt, always simple, in all times applicable. The waning love of Ephesus is summoned to **remember**. I have already spoken of the need of a faithful use of memory. It is often painful to contemplate the contrast of present and past experience; but however painful, we must obey the command, “**Remember.**” It is the surest way to repentance in such cases as these. To obey the first precept is to prepare the way for obedience to the second: **Repent, and do the first works.** And observe the peril of disobedience, of neglect, or even of delay: **Behold I am coming quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.** That very faculty of memory, which is now a minister of mercy calling us back to the



Saviour's tender love, may in the near future, if not obeyed, become the most dreadful of His ministers of judgement. If it brings not forth repentance, it will bring forth eternal remorse. We shall recall the words of Abraham to Dives in his torment: "Son, remember." *Now* we may stifle memory; but not always shall we be able to do so. There is an unspeakable solemnity in the word: good works, labour, patience, all are present, but if withal the heart is growing colder, all is wrong. The Church, if we apply it to the Church, is in danger of destruction; the soul, if we apply it to the soul, is in danger of being forsaken by its Lord.

Smyrna, the distressed and persecuted, needed no word of warning, only a cheering cry of encouragement: **Fear not.** There is indeed tribulation to be endured; but as it were for only ten days; "the times" are in the Lord's hand; the fiery trials "endure but for a moment," and are working out "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." The exhortation is almost a repetition of the prophecy of our Lord during His earthly ministry: "Ye shall be betrayed . . . ye shall be hated of all men for My name's sake; some of you shall they cause to be put to death; but there shall not an hair of your head perish" (Luke 21:16-18). Glorious



paradox! for the full exposition of which, as we shall see presently, the greater part of this book was written. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30<sup>5</sup>). Death is the gate of life.

Pergamos, as we have seen, had been guilty of an unhallowed toleration; and the whole body of the church is called upon to repent on account of the sins of some of its members. There are many passages in Scripture which remind us that we are, in a very serious sense, "members one of another," and that a church or congregation as a whole may be under a heavy responsibility, and have need of a corporate humiliation. This church, like that of Corinth, must repent for its sinning members (1 Cor. 5<sup>2</sup>, 2 Cor. 7<sup>11</sup>); otherwise He whose word is Truth will come quickly and will fight against the error, and those that hold and practise it. Thereby the church, which might have gloried in reclaiming its imperilled children, must be dishonoured, and suffer loss and weakness through their destruction. "None of us liveth unto himself" (Rom. 14<sup>7</sup>).

Thyatira, from the nature of the fault charged against it, receives a double warning or admonition; the first addressed to the particular cause of offence, the second to the church at large.



The sinner is solemnly reminded of a day of grace sinned away. I gave her time to repent . . . and she repented not; and now for her the day of judgement has come. The Jezebel of Thyatira is singled out for all but instant condemnation; the bed of lust becomes the bed of tribulation and death. Behold I cast her on to a bed; the tense is present; and the same sentence impends over all partakers of her sin, except they repent. Again we are bidden to learn that there is a purpose of mercy in these visitations of manifest wrath. They are sent that all the churches may know that I am He which searcheth the reins and hearts (v. 23).

But unto the rest in Thyatira the Lord brings none other burden. The old burden of constant endurance, patient faith, strenuous efforts to hold fast, this yoke which is easy, this burden which is light, if borne with the strength which He will give,—this must be borne till He comes, or till He calls us hence to the rest remaining.

The evil state of Sardis has already been often noticed. Remembering its peril, we are prepared for the fulness and the passion of the words of entreaty and advice which follow. They in fact include all that is addressed to all the churches. **Watch, Strengthen, Remember, Hold fast, Repent.** The sad necessities of all are



combined and accumulated in this slothful dying congregation. It needs to apply every remedy, to be reminded of every resource, lest its day of visitation and judgement should take it unawares, lest He come quickly and find nought but cold grey ashes on the altar whose fire is already flickering to extinction. Its lethargy must be shaken off, its feeble faith and weakly formal works receive new inspiration from the Spirit of Life; the half-forgotten word of truth remembered; energy must be put forth to grasp again that power which was slipping from the nerveless hands. So repentance may be reached, and with the mouth "confession be made unto salvation" (Rom. 10 10). So the hand may be stayed which is moving to blot their names out of the book of life; and the perishing may yet hear the voice of the Son of God, and live to walk with Him in white.

Philadelphia, patient, faithful, and active, is but bidden to hold fast. Words which were words of warning to Sardis are here words of promise: **Behold I come quickly.** For the first the sudden coming would mean destruction; for the second it means rest from temptation, an end of weariness, the fruition of victory for the toil of conflict. Yet "let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10 12).



However prosperous the work of grace, however strong the soul's life to-day, it must be remembered that the enemy is near and watchful. The crown is not yet finally secured. The figure is that so often used by St. Paul of the garland which awaits the athlete who wins his race. The vain confidence which relaxes effort even at the last moment may yet lose us the prize. But the voice here is full of encouragement; and it is one for which believers often love to listen. It is a call to endure yet for a little while. The goal is near; the worst half of the toil is over; the wreath is almost grasped. But a little while and the weary runner shall be able to say, "I have finished my course."

If to Sardis was addressed the fullest and most comprehensive exhortation, Laodicea, its fellow in peril and disgrace, receives the longest and severest. It was in the deadly peril of self-deception. In its estimate of its own condition it was calling evil good, and good evil; was putting darkness for light, and light for darkness; bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter. Its members were wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight (Isa. 5<sup>20, 21</sup>). They were living in a self-gratulatory sense of security, mistaking a benumbed conscience for a clear conscience (an error dreadfully common and



dreadfully dangerous), rejoicing in peace and ease and wealth, which were all delusive. Sharp indeed is the two-edged sword which smites them in rebuke: I counsel thee (the self-satisfied, vaunting in sleek prosperity) to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see—see things as they are so as to call them by their right names, so that “the vile person shall no more be called liberal, nor the churl said to be bountiful” (Isa. 32<sup>5</sup>). The awakening will be painful; but how blessed if it is while still the Saviour stands at the door and knocks, instead of that fatal belated awakening “to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12<sup>2</sup>). The rebuke is sharp, yet how tender the tone which follows! The deserved irony is quickly over, and the final exhortation to repentance has in it an inimitable pathos which has broken the hearts of thousands. It is a gracious reversal of the figure which in the gospel sets forth the willingness of the Divine Father to give good gifts to them that ask Him (Matt. 7<sup>7,11</sup>). It was beyond human thought that God should open His treasure-house when the repentant sinner knocks. It is overwhelming to hear that



even if the sinner be falsely secure, conscious of the need of nothing, then the Son will come and knock, patiently waiting to make His invitation heard. It is none other than that same Saviour who, in the days of His flesh, girt Himself with a towel and washed the feet of a Judas, if so be He might break that heart of stone. Though now radiant with the glory that is all His own, the patience and the love are the same.

VI. We have now reached the consideration of the sevenfold promise, whose assurance is as full of joy as the warnings are of solemnity. There is no church of the seven excluded. There is still hope for all, even for Sardis and Laodicea, if they will arise and resume the conflict, which is the essential condition of a church's life in this militant state. To him that overcometh, is the seven times repeated superscription of the promised blessings. The policy of the kingdom of heaven is War. The book is full of it, and "every battle of the warrior is with confused noise and garments rolled in blood," as Isaiah wrote (95) when he first foretold the advent of "the Prince of Peace." "Peace on earth," sang the angels when He came; but His words were, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matt. 1034). Such is the open paradox of



prophecy and of history. The goal is peace ; but peace is impossible before victory, and victory is only purchased by battle. Woe to the idle and fearful and unbelieving who persistently cry "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jer. 6<sup>14</sup> 8<sup>11</sup>). Such are the dead and the lukewarm in spirit. Great indeed is the frequent temptation to put off the armour ; but it must not, it cannot be, until the whole fight with sin is over, or the day comes when we, one by one, are taken to rest from our labours, and to wait thence a little season until our fellow-servants and their brethren shall be fulfilled (ch. 6<sup>11</sup>).

First, to the victors from Ephesus He promises the fruit of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. The words carry our thoughts back to the very dawn of revelation. They are a reminder of the solemn, mysterious scene when "man's first disobedience . . . brought death into the world and all our woe." The Church must now live in the midst of battle ; but "from the beginning it was not so." The world is full of pain and confusion, but it is not of God's making. Of His handywork He truly said, "Behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1<sup>31</sup>). Of the mischief we read, "An enemy hath done this" (Matt. 13<sup>28</sup>). Yielding to the deceit of the enemy, man lost his right to the tree of life. It



symbolised, as I venture to read the parable of Eden, a manner of communion with God which was suitable only for the sinless. For the guilty, another sacrament than this was necessary if life was to be gained at all. And by the sacrifice and atonement on Calvary the needed provision was made. Now, and all through this dispensation of grace, when sinners would "feed on Him in their hearts with thanksgiving," they must "show forth the Lord's death." All access is conditioned on this. "Without shedding of blood is no remission" (Heb. 9<sup>22</sup>). But the promise of Paradise and the tree of life restored comes to us as an assurance that the work of redemption is a perfect work; that for him that endureth to the end and overcometh, all the dire effects of the Fall shall be reversed. In the Paradise of God the victors shall have regained a perfectly sinless state, and shall be restored to a sinless communion with their Lord. For ever they will uplift their voices in praise to "the Lamb that was slain," but faith shall have been eternally lost in sight, the sorrows of contrition and confession will have been left behind; their robes of victory shall be immaculately white; their salvation is "to the uttermost." Could any stimulus to effort for the regaining of a lost love be more potent than such a promise?



Smyrna, the troubled yet faithful church, is encouraged in words which have a special interest. **Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.** There is indeed no assurance of any amelioration of their lot in this life. "Bonds and affliction await" them and their pastor, as they awaited and befell the chief of the apostles; but the crown awaits them too. Death, even martyrdom by fire, was threatening; but, having feared and been faithful to Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell (Matt. 10<sup>28</sup>), they are delivered from all other fear. "The lake of fire which is the second death" hath no alarm, "no power" for them (ch. 20<sup>6, 14</sup>). When Death and Hell are cast therein, they shall be before the throne. A peculiar interest attaches to the promise in this case, from the fact that the early history of the church of Smyrna records for us such an instance of faithfulness unto death as even the glorious annals of martyrology have never surpassed. It is true that if the date which we have assumed as that of the production of this book be correct, St. Polycarp cannot have been, as some have supposed, the "angel" here addressed. A century later, however, the devil was still persecuting the saints at Smyrna; the



whole force of Rome was bent on exterminating the faith. In the year 167, this aged pupil of St. John was the Bishop of Smyrna, and on him burst the storm. He was urged by his disciples to fly from the danger, and for a while concealed himself. He was, however, discovered, by the evidence, as it is said, of a child, whose confession was procured by torture; and notwithstanding every effort made to induce him to save his life by a denial of the faith, he steadily persisted in that fidelity which won for him a martyr's crown. His judges appear to have been humane men of their kind, willing to accept any formal compliance with the law as a sufficient claim to indulgence. They plied him with temptations to partake in idolatrous sacrifices, and to utter words abjuring Christ. The old saint's reply is historic: "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How then can I curse Him, my King and my Saviour?" The confession was his death-warrant. The whole "synagogue of Satan" hurried him to the stake, where he perished with words of praise on his lips: "I thank Thee that Thou hast thought me worthy, this day and hour, to share the cup of Thy Christ, among the number of Thy witnesses." Verily such shall not be hurt of the second death.



The promise to the church of Pergamos is again, like that to Ephesus, couched in symbolism, expressed in terms partly referring to the Old Testament history, and partly, as it would appear, to a Gentile custom not now clearly understood. The victors were to partake of the hidden manna, and to receive a white stone, and in the stone a new name written which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it. The first part of the promise presents little difficulty to the interpreter. It recalls the "golden pot that had manna" (Heb. 9<sup>4</sup>), hidden in the ark of the Covenant in the Holiest place (Ex. 16<sup>33, 34</sup>), as a perpetual memorial of the Divine sustenance during the forty years' proving in the wilderness. Christ Himself interprets the parable of the Manna: "I am the Living Bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever" (John 6<sup>51</sup>). The words before us, then, are a reminder of the power of the Lord to sustain the strength of pilgrims in their desert journey, and an assurance that He will so feed them every day with angels' food that none shall suffer want. The precise significance of the promise of the "white stone" is neither clear nor certain. It is obvious that there is a close connexion between the gift of the stone and the bestowal of a new and secret



name ; and this feature in the words of encouragement can scarcely fail to remind us of the "new names" given to the fathers of Israel of old, as memorials of their finding favour and prevailing with God, and of that glorious promise made through Isaiah (62<sup>2,4</sup>) to the Church, of which the seed of Abraham and Israel were the type: "Thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name. . . . Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken ; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate ; but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah : for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married." Here, however, the name is a secret between the Giver and the receiver ; and the very thought speaks of a communion between the saint and the Saviour, unspeakably precious because of its peculiar intimacy. It is only with our best beloved that we share our closest secrets, and "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him" (Ps. 25<sup>14</sup>). Taking the stone and the name together, it may be that the whole promise refers to the gift of a token of admission to the *penetralia* of the mystery of God ; the white stone, a token of the right to pass the barrier of initiation, the name a password which will unfailingly admit to the inmost presence-chamber of the Master.



For the church of growing zeal at Thyatira there is a double promise. There were saints there whose last works were more than the first. Such must have been fired by a holy ambition, must have often prayed for greater and greater power from on high. To such, what words could be more full of joy than those which assure them of fellowship with the Lord Himself in His might and victory? There is no Old Testament prophecy more surely Messianic than the second psalm, which promises to the Begotten Son the heathen for His inheritance, and invests Him with power to break the rebellious nations with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces as a potter's vessel. And here we read that, as He received this kingly right from His Father, He will share it with those that conquer in His name, and keep His works to the end. And how shall this wonder be? Even because He gives to them the **Morning Star**. Later in the prophecy we hear the voice of Jesus, saying, "I am . . . the Bright and Morning Star" (22<sup>16</sup>). The gift of power, then, is the gift of Himself, the Light of the World, "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1<sup>24</sup>). It is a marvellous promise this, of association or even union of the finite with the Infinite, but we find it paralleled by the faith of another apostle, who calls his



readers to no lesser glory than that of being "partakers of the Divine nature" (2 Pet. 14).

We have already sufficiently considered the lamentable condition of the church in Sardis, to realise how difficult it must have been, in the midst of that dying congregation, for the few to maintain the unsullied whiteness of their robes, and to sustain a faithful confession of a truly spiritual religion. It is not an easy thing for a tempted man to live a life of real faith amidst the scorn and resistance of avowed scoffers and worldlings. But I think experience warrants the saying that a far subtler temptation has to be overcome by those who are called on to preserve freshness and fervency of spirit amidst a society of decorous but merely formal professors of religion. The open taunt of the bold sinner sometimes raises the very pride which is in us on the side of consistency. The cold politeness which scarcely veils a sneer on the lips of one who avows himself an orthodox believer, creates a much more dangerous besetment. It has all the selfishness and sloth of our nature on its side. "Worthy" indeed, then, were those few names who had passed undefiled and scatheless through this peril. The promise must have been precious which spoke of the gift of robes for ever white as no fuller on earth



could whiten them; of the preservation of their names in the book of Christ's eternal memory, that He might confess them before His Father and before the angels. The words are a repetition, in circumstances precisely apt, of what the Master had said in His first mission of the Twelve (Matt. 10<sup>32</sup>), and again to a multitude of hearers (Luke 12<sup>8</sup>).

Philadelphia received first a promise of sustenance in the life which now is; then an assurance of eternal reward. The success of patient work should reward its enduring labourers; their fidelity should break down the resistance of their bitterest foes; the Captain of their salvation pledges Himself to succour them in the hour of temptation, be its stress never so severe; and every sharer of His victory is bidden to look forward with a glorious hope to an eternal abiding in the temple of His God. The figure which likens believers to living stones in a living temple is one common to many sacred writers (Eph. 2<sup>21</sup>, 1 Pet. 2<sup>4, 5</sup>). Here, as in Gal. 2<sup>9</sup>, conspicuous diligence and fidelity are represented as titles to conspicuous honour in the "building fitly framed together." Every stone has its place, but the pillars of the temple at once adorn and sustain the excellent beauty of its façade. The thought at once calls before our



minds the majesty of a Grecian portico ; and the imagery which follows continues the reference, as it speaks of the graving thereon of the name of God, and of His glorious city, and of the new Name, yet to be revealed, which the Christ shall bear when the work of the world's salvation shall have been accomplished. Again we see a reiteration of the Master's earlier words : " If any man serve Me, him will My Father honour " (John 12<sup>26</sup>).

We have already observed that that church which is most sharply rebuked receives the tenderest words of entreaty. It receives also the most glorious words of promise. We can imagine no apter illustration than that which we find in our Saviour's words to Laodicea of the saying, " Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth. . . . If you endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons " (Heb. 12<sup>6, 7</sup>). He has spoken to other churches more worthy of reward, in terms which promise community of joy, of triumph, of knowledge, of power, of glory. To Laodicean conquerors He emphasises His pathetic exhortation by the promise of a place upon His very throne. It is a repetition of one of the "faithful sayings" with which St. Paul encouraged Timothy : " If we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him : if we suffer, we shall also



reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2<sup>11</sup>); and recalls the same apostle's apostrophe to Corinthian litigants: "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?" (1 Cor. 6<sup>2</sup>). It is a summons to the seat of highest honour, to share the glory and authority of Jesus, as He has been called up to share the glory and authority of His Father. It is the assurance of the fulfilment to all the faithful of His wonderful sacrificial prayer, "that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us. . . . And the glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them; that they may be one, even as We are one: I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one. . . . Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am" (John 17<sup>21 ff.</sup>). The words are a climax of promise which it could not have entered into the heart of man to conceive. Higher inspiration for duty, for endurance, for valour, there could not be.

VII. After reading them, we may well ponder with all joy and seriousness the solemn words of commendation and command which form the seventh division in each of the epistles to the seven churches. **He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.** The words are almost an echo of those often used by



our Lord to emphasize His teaching when here on earth. Yet there is a difference. Now, though the message is still from Christ, who walks in the midst of the candlesticks, the words are the words of the Spirit, for He, the Comforter, the Strengthenener, the Exhorter, has gone forth into all the world, an eternal Presence, to teach all things, to guide into all truth. Here, as in a sevenfold sermon, the Voice speaks to all ages, rich with promise, terrible in warning, infinitely wise in teaching.



## CHAPTER III.

### THE SEALED ROLL.

(Chs. 4-81.)

#### I. THE SCENE.

(Ch. 4.)

**H**ITHERTO the scene of this prophecy has been upon earth. Christ has come down from heaven to manifest Himself to His Church by the testimony of the beloved disciple, who once more has "beheld His glory, as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1<sub>14</sub>), and once more has heard the voice which spake as never man spake. We have already seen that a special reason for this wondrous visitation may be discerned in the evil days which had already fallen on the Church, and which were not soon to pass away. In truth, the hour had struck for the fulfilment, the first, the primary fulfilment, of our Lord's great prophecy of the last days. The eagles were gather-



ing together over the carcass of Judaism (Matt. 24<sup>28</sup>). The armies were compassing Jerusalem. The "great tribulation" was impending over the Church and the world. If it was necessary to remember this historic fact when meditating on the first vision, the necessity henceforth will be greater still. We are now on the threshold of the fulfilment of the Lord's promise. He has spoken to the seven churches of the things which are ; He is about to reveal the things which shall be hereafter (ch. 1<sup>19</sup>). The long and dreadful tragedy of human history is to be rehearsed before the seer's astonished eyes.

A door was opened in heaven, and the first voice, that is, the same voice heard before in Patmos, was now heard speaking from God's throne, and saying, **Come up hither.** Immediately the seer was, as it were, entranced : he **was in the spirit.** Before him was **a throne set in heaven,** and Him that sat thereon. The description that follows varies from, but has evident reference to, that given us by Ezekiel when he too saw "visions of God" (Ezek. 1), as also to the apocryphal Book of Enoch (14<sup>17-23</sup>). Ezekiel describes "Him that sat thereon" as in likeness "as the appearance of a man," attended by the "colour of amber" and "appearance of fire," and overarched as by "the bow that is in the cloud



in the day of rain." St. John refrains from any attempt at description of the Divine Person, though the irresistible suggestion is that of a manlike figure. He compares the similitude to a jasper and a sardine stone. The jasper is described in ch. 21<sup>11</sup> as being "clear as crystal," a quality not possessed by the stone now known by this name. Probably the translucent chalcedony is the stone which corresponds most closely to the prophet's idea. The "sardine stone," or sardius, is undoubtedly the choicest red carnelian. The combination of the two has the effect of very nearly reproducing the imagery of Ezekiel. The rainbow round about the throne is common to both visions.

If it is necessary to attach a specific interpretation to the details of the symbolism, there is little danger of error in interpreting the "jasper, clear as crystal," as an emblem of the purity, and the flaming sardius as an emblem of the justice, of the Almighty. The significance of the rainbow is obviously its historic connexion with the ancient "covenant" of God with man (Gen. 9<sup>13</sup>). Mercy and grace are the attributes which it irresistibly suggests, attributes which alone make the throne of holiness and justice accessible to man, who has sinned, but trusting in which he may, through the eternal Mediator, "draw near with boldness."



The effect, therefore, of the various symbols in combination is to evoke a feeling of solemn reverence, tempered with confidence. We "are not come unto the mount . . . that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest . . . but . . . unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born . . . and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel" (Heb. 12<sup>18 ff.</sup>). Part of this description is already justified, the remainder follows.

Round about the throne were four-and-twenty thrones: and upon the thrones were four-and-twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. There are two almost equally plausible explanations of the number twenty-four. The reference may be to the twenty-four courses of priests, amongst whom was distributed the unceasing ministry in the temple (1 Chron. 24); or the number may be explained as a combination of the twelve Patriarchs of Israel with the twelve Apostles of the Lamb, an association which has some warrant from a passage in the Gospels (Matt. 19<sup>28</sup>, Luke



22<sup>30</sup>), as well as from other expressions in this book (ch. 21<sup>12, 14</sup>). Whichever be the explanation of the figure, the interpretation is practically the same. It is one of the often-repeated promises of Scripture that His redeemed shall sit with Christ on His throne (ch. 3<sup>12</sup>, 1 Cor. 6<sup>2</sup>, 2 Tim. 2<sup>12</sup>); and that the redeemed from among men are here represented is clear. It is difficult, however, to maintain that the elders are present on the throne as types of the whole triumphant Church. Later in this vision we have more than once a distinction suggested between the elders and the great multitude of the saved (5<sup>13, 14</sup> 7<sup>9, 11</sup>), and so also in a subsequent vision (14<sup>1-3</sup>); and though it is not necessary to demand perfect consistency in a complex, symbolic vision, any more than in an allegory, it is safer to avoid a conflict or confusion of imagery whenever possible. It is certainly possible here to suggest a consistent interpretation which involves no difficulty. By whichever of the two hypotheses above referred to we explain the number twenty-four, we are led to contemplate the distinction between the divinely appointed officers or leaders of the Church and the great body of members. We should not suffer a revulsion of feeling, reasonably aroused by the sacerdotal pretensions of the clergy of Rome, to induce us to depreciate the



Divine institution and peculiar honour of the ministry of the Church. They are not "lords over God's heritage" (1 Pet. 5<sub>3</sub>), but they are pastors of His flock (*ib.* v.2), whose right it is to rule as well as to teach. If, then, the foundations of the city, as we read in a later chapter (21<sub>14</sub>), bear "the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb," we need not be surprised to find that the imagery here suggests the awarding of especial distinction in heaven to those who bore below the care of all the churches. They share with the one hundred and forty-four thousand, ay, with the "great multitude which no man could number" (ch. 7<sub>9</sub>), the white robes and the crowns of victory (ch. 2<sub>10</sub>); yet are there differences in degrees of splendour and of honour in the hierarchy of heaven. As "one star differeth from another star in glory, so also is the resurrection of the dead" (1 Cor. 15<sub>41, 42</sub>).

The thunderings and lightnings and voices proceeding from the throne, recall the theophany of Sinai, and are mentioned again and again as an exhortation to fear Him with whom "is terrible majesty" (8<sub>5</sub> 16<sub>18</sub>, cf. Job 37<sub>22</sub>). The Lamps of fire burning before the throne are interpreted as being symbolical of the seven Spirits of God, or, as we may probably render it, the Holy Spirit viewed in the light of His seven-



fold attributes, gifts, and operations. The number has a possible reference to the seven "eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth" (Zech. 3:9-4:10), signifying here the omniscience, as the thunderings and lightnings do the omnipotence of the mighty God. **Before the throne was a sea of glass like unto crystal,** as before the earthly temple there had been a "molten sea" of brass (1 Kings 7:23). To a Jewish believer there was a deep significance and consolation, which we can scarcely realise, in every such reference to the fulfilment, eternal in the heavens, of all the holy symbols which were about for ever to disappear from the earth.

**In the midst of the throne and round about the throne were four living creatures,** which, from the almost exact similarity of description, we at once identify with the "cherubim" of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 1:5ff. 10): the same complex figures which we meet with first at the entrance of a lost Eden (Gen. 3:24), and which in sculptured representation overshadowed the mercy seat of the holy ark (Ex. 25:18) in both tabernacle and temple. What the true significance of these figures may be has been a matter of endless speculation and dispute, and, attractive though the subject is, space cannot be spared for its full consideration here. Naturally enough I was long



disposed to accept the conclusions reached by my father after an exhaustive examination of all the scriptures which are calculated to throw light on it. It is impossible even to summarize his extended argument leading up to the interpretation which explains the cherubim as the symbolic representation of the redeemed Church of Christ.<sup>1</sup> I may certainly be permitted to characterize the reasoning as something far more than merely ingenious; but it is impossible, in reading it at this day, to forget that the very keystone of the argument was the ascription to the living creatures, together with the elders (ch. 5 9, 10), of a new song expressed in terms which none but the redeemed among men could sing: "Thou wast slain, and *hast redeemed us* to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation: and hast made us unto God kings and priests." But when the *Doctrine of the Cherubim* was written the materials for the construction of an accurate text of this book were less copious than they now are, and, moreover, the science of textual criticism was much less developed. Unfortunately for the argument of that work, the reading of the verses above quoted has by almost common consent been so changed as to deprive them of all relevance

<sup>1</sup> See *Doctrine of the Cherubim*, by George Smith, LL.D.



to the argument. The word "us," on which so much depended, is found to be without authority, and in the Revised Version we read, "Thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God *men* of every tribe," etc. To say that this destroys the exposition entirely would be an exaggeration, but it certainly robs it of much of its cogency. Still, the fact remains that the cherubic figures, both in the Old Testament and the New, are closely associated with the sacrificial worship of God; their especial connexion with the "bloodstained mercy seat" of the ark is strongly suggestive of their signifying the human objects of the work of redemption; and the position and action ascribed to them in this vision seem quite consistent with this interpretation. Perhaps the safest conclusion is that which regards them as symbols of the earthly sentient creation of God, inclusive of humanity, as distinguished from the angelic host, the mention of which presently follows. "The whole creation," we read, "groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Rom. 8<sup>22</sup>). Every earthly creature in a sense participated in the ruin of the Fall, and is concerned in the "restitution of all things." Thus we may find a clue to the meaning of the fourfold living things; the lion, the ox, the man, the eagle, being as it were representative figures



among sentient creatures here idealised, and depicted as joining in the ceaseless adoration of God and the Lamb. "*Let every thing that hath breath* praise the Lord" (Ps. 150<sup>6</sup>). "O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever." Here they sing the hymn of the seraphim in the vision of Isaiah (63): "With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven they laud and magnify His glorious name, evermore praising Him and saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!"

The fourth chapter is of course but an introduction to the revelation which is to follow; yet it is also a glorious revelation in itself, full of instruction and consolation. In the midst of the toils and conflicts of the world and sin, is it not a measureless joy to know that the throne of God is established on high, that His Spirit goeth forth into all the world, that His eyes behold the children of men? And is not this splendid glimpse through the open door of heaven a weighty exhortation to solemn reverence? We behold the symbols of mercy and of love, but we hear also the thunderings and voices; and the theme of the heavenly song is Holiness. Again and again we shall find the course of the further revelation stayed by the bursting forth of praise. The fact itself is the richest promise



of the future, and it is also a call to remember the duty of praise in the present.

## II. THE ROLL.

(Ch. v.)

Having, as it were, called us up with him into the heavenly places, and set before us the infinite serenity which from thence looks down on the moiling earth, the seer proceeds to develop the apocalyptic vision in the words: I saw in the right hand of Him that sat on the throne a roll written within and on the back, close sealed with seven seals. Though securely fastened, so that until the loosing of the seventh seal the roll could not be spread forth so as to be freely read, it was seen to be overflowing with writing within and on the back side, like that in which the counsels of God were made known to Ezekiel (210), wherein were written "lamentations and mourning and woe." The thought is clearly that of a Divine message already fully prepared, but the time for the disclosure of which has not yet come,—“ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 15), but not now. It is “as the words of a book . . . which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee; and he saith, I cannot, for it is sealed” (Isa. 2911).



When we consider the circumstances of the seer, and of the times in which he lived and received this visitation, we can scarcely be in doubt as to how he would interpret this scene. The burden then weighing on the mind of the distressed Church was the mystery, the inscrutable ways of the providence of God. What they longed to know was the meaning of the strange delay in the fulfilment of prophecies of triumph, of the weary course of discipline through which they were called to pass. They "looked for judgement, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry" (Isa. 57). It seems, then, natural to suppose that the seer and his readers would interpret the vision of the sealed roll under the influence of this protracted perplexity, and would see in it a sealed answer to the questions which were on every lip, which were distressing every impatient heart. So we can readily understand the prophet's tears when there seemed for a while to be no response to the challenge of the mighty angel, and no one in heaven nor in the earth, neither under the earth, that is, in the regions of the dead, was able to open the roll, neither to look thereon. It was the very punishment of Tantalus to be thus in the presence of the means to solve their doubts, and yet to see the scroll remain close sealed. We



sympathise with his revulsion of joy when one of the elders bids him weep not, but behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who hath prevailed to open the roll, and to loose the seven seals thereof. The terms used, heard by one deeply versed in the prophecies of the older scriptures (Gen. 49<sup>9</sup>, Isa. 11<sup>1,10</sup>), and believing in their fulfilment in Christ, would at once fix his thoughts on the Person of the Saviour. There is, however, something strikingly significant in the change of description which follows in the sixth verse. The summons of the elder was to behold the Lion. The seer beheld, in the midst of the throne, a little Lamb (such is the force of the word) as it had been slain, yet, though bearing the marks of deadly wounds, standing in all the strength of life. By the saint already glorified the Lord was seen in an aspect suggestive of might and victory; to the saint still wearing the body of humiliation and subject to sin and death, He appeared in the form of a sacrifice for sin, whose blood was still flowing to cleanse and to atone; alive, and yet "as it were newly slain," having made "by His one oblation of Himself, once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." It is true that in a later vision—the vision of the



New Jerusalem as it appeared after the destruction of all sin, and the perfect salvation of all saints—we read of Christ as still bearing the form of the Lamb (ch. 21<sup>22, 23</sup>). Never to all eternity will the saved forget the sacrifice, or cease to adore Him, in perpetual memory of the death which opened the gates of life. Nevertheless, we discern something natural in the words of the elder, who, having already overcome “by the blood of the Lamb” (ch. 12<sup>11</sup>), henceforth views his Lord in a form which speaks of glory and strength, rather than one which tells of grace and mercy.

But though Lamb-like in appearance to the prophet, the Christ is seen with all the attributes of Divine omnipotence and omniscience, **having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth** (Zech. 4<sup>10</sup>),—horns which are ever symbolic of power, as the eyes are of wisdom. It was a consolation then in days of persecution, it is so now in days of scepticism, to be assured of the eternal existence of a Power which is beyond all that which is political or mechanical, of a Wisdom which infinitely transcends the shortsighted knowledge of men; of the might and watchfulness of “Christ the Power of God, and the Wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1<sup>24</sup>).



Here again for a while the progress of the vision is stayed by a renewed outburst of adoration. The standing forth of Christ on the throne, and His reception of the roll, are the signal for the uplifting of the voices of the living creatures and the elders in a mighty chorus of praise. Heaven's courts are fragrant with odours which are the prayers of saints; heaven's air is tremulous with the music of harps and voices. First it is raised by the saved from the earth, who share the longing of the still incarnate seer to read the roll of the counsels of God, and await the perfecting of their number and of the Lord's triumph. Then the innumerable company of angels join in overwhelming volume, rising louder and louder; then from every bound of creation—from the earth, from under the earth, from the sea—the harmony of praise is strengthened still, as the universe ascribes Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power to Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. Then the infinite sound dies away,—there follows the grand **Amen** of all created life, and the silent adoration of the amazed and prostrate saints.

Never were descriptive words more thrilling than these, which take us for a while into the heavenly places. Let us read them not as a mere record of a fleeting vision of the past. These things



which are not seen are eternal. The record is a revelation also of the present. This song is echoing still; our prayers add to the fragrance of the odours, our voices are welcome there, are distinguished amidst even the vast chorus by Him that sits on the throne, and whose ear is open still to the cry of the needy.

### III. THE OPENING OF THE SEALS.

(Ch. 6-81.)

All things are now ready for the further development of the vision. The Lamb holds the roll in His hand, and stands in the midst of the silent, expectant hierarchy of heaven. As we shall presently see, the disclosure of the contents of the sealed book does not really form part of the revelation at all. Until the opening of the seventh seal the writing could not be spread forth for reading; and when it is so, there is no statement of its contents. Only a solemn silence ensues (ch. 81), to be followed by a second and independent series of visions. Yet every slow and deliberate step towards the unfolding of the secret writing is attended by phenomena of deep significance. The process of the opening of the seals is in itself, as it would appear, the revelation for which this vision is prepared and



made manifest in heaven. The very calmness and patience of the procedure has its lesson for us. He that rules over all does not make haste. His every act is an answer to prayer; but inasmuch as the full and complete answer cannot be made known until the end of all things,—until history is finished and judgement past,—the very delay is an act of mercy, a prolongation of the day of grace, an extension of the Church's opportunity for work and of sinners' opportunity for repentance. If He is infinitely patient in His waiting to see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied, He may well invoke His children also to patience,—to bear their burden of labour and perplexity for a "little season," while the door of grace remains open for the perishing to come in and be saved.

The consideration of the gradual opening of the roll naturally divides itself into four heads. The phenomena attending the breaking of the first four seals have a unity of their own, which mark them off from those which follow, and they are conveniently considered together. In each case one of the living creatures utters a voice, as it were of thunder, crying **Come**. We are not to suppose it addressed to the seer himself, as the words "Come and see" in the Authorised Version would suggest. We cannot imagine that he would



need such a reiterated summons, now that the satisfaction of the intense longing of his heart is being gradually prepared. Is, then, the cry addressed to the apparitions which successively appear, to the visionary horsemen which immediately cross the stage, the call being the signal for their entry, like the thrice-repeated "Show!" in the great incantation scene in *Macbeth* (Act IV. sc. 1)? It may be so; yet, on consideration of the whole circumstances, there seems something more harmonious and consonant with the spirit of the scene in the supposition that these sonorous voices are really addressed to the Lord,—are calls for His advent to triumph, the vocal expression of the prayer which springs from creation's groaning and travailing in pain, an anticipation of the cry of the Spirit and the Bride, of which we read at the end of the whole matter (2217).

But what is signified by the horses and their riders? The very association of the four together warns us against identifying the first of the riders with the conquering Christ, notwithstanding the similarity of the figure to the vision of the Lord as portrayed in ch. 19<sup>11</sup>. The last three go forth into the earth with a certain mission of judgement; woe and death are in their train. It leads to hopeless confusion of thought



to picture the Christ as a colleague, as it were, of these. The Lord is One, and there is none beside Him (Isa. 45<sup>5</sup>). The description of the horses directs our thoughts to Zechariah's vision of the chariots (6<sup>1-8</sup>); but there the obscurity is even greater than it is here; it does not assist us. Rather would we turn for illumination, in this and in very many other mysteries of this book, to the great prophecy of the last days which the Lord uttered almost on the eve of His passion (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21), and which is so fully recorded by each of the synoptic Evangelists. He spoke then to prepare His disciples for the life of toil and danger which was before them, in amplification of His earlier words: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matt. 10<sup>34-36</sup>). In many solemn words He paints for them and for us the troubled course of the future history of the race. He teaches that the casting out of Satan will be no short or summary process. He speaks of wars and rumours of wars, of famines, of pestilences, of earthquakes and fearful sights, of intestine



discords worse than these, of persecutions, of martyrdoms, of deceiving prophets, and at last of a climax of tribulation which would be fatal to the race were it not shortened for the elect's sake. The term of the primary fulfilment of these sad predictions was now nigh at hand. The day was near in which it would be wisdom for them in Judæa to flee into the mountains. Yet it was needful for the Church to learn that these woes were not to be the final accomplishment of the Saviour's words; that the terrible climax of that age and nation was, after all, but typical of a future and yet greater climax. We read in the prophecy of the Gospels,—in one place, "This generation shall not pass away till all be fulfilled" (Luke 21<sup>32</sup>), and in another, "The end is not by and by" (v. 9). This vision we may look upon as an amplification of the second of these thoughts,—a symbolical repetition of the prophecy, for the instruction in patience and endurance of the Church of all time. We find that down to and including the opening of the sixth seal, the correspondence between the two revelations is very close.

Thus, the armed and crowned conqueror who rides forth amongst the nations on the white horse we would regard as the symbol of war. "There shall be wars and rumours of wars." Of



the exactness of the fulfilment of the prediction, history leaves us in no manner of doubt. There has never been a century free from the devastation of national conflicts on a vast scale. Perhaps there has never been a year unstained with the blood of battle in some degree; and even when, as at this moment, the mightiest armies are not actually engaged in strife, as they stand to their arms in perpetual watchfulness and suspicion we feel that the world enjoys little more than a precarious armistice. We can scarcely call it Peace, when we know that, as in 1870, a moment of anxiety or of impatience on the part of a single man might set millions at each other's throats. The "rumours" are ceaseless, even when there is a brief respite from actual conflict. The enlightened philanthropist may well sigh at the wild waste and unreasonableness of such a state of things. The Christian will pray for the shortening of these days by Him "who breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder" (Ps. 469), but he is forbidden to think for a moment that this or the other evils here declared are signs that the Lord has forgotten the earth. Over and above all the throne remains set in the heavens, encircled with the rainbow which tells of a season of clear shining after storm. He is taught that until sin is destroyed the



earth must be in a literal sense a battlefield. There are evils which would be more fatal to humanity than bloodshed and death. The luxurious, untroubled reign of iniquity of which the effeminate worldling of to-day so vainly dreams would be such an evil, and He that sitteth in the heavens will not in mercy suffer it. "Peace on earth" will be only possible when sin and Satan shall have been cast out of it. The evangelist who "converteth a sinner from the error of his way" does more in the direction of delivering the world from the curse of war, than is possible to the merely political scheming of a hundred Congresses.

The second horseman is no mere repetition of the first. He symbolises the aggravated horrors of a discord which is worse than the war of nations. Christ had spoken of such intestine strife,—of dissensions within the State, even within the family, of hatred and murder and betrayals between the near of kin, of a man's enemies being those of his own household. Him on the red horse I take to be the ruling spirit of such ills as these. And again history bears fatal testimony to his working. The worst of wars is the civil war; and perhaps the anguish, the cruelties of *émeutes* and insurrections which have not attained the dimensions of civil war, have



been more grievous still. It was ingenious enough in a way for Carlyle, at the conclusion of his great epic, to sum up the numbers who perished in the massacres and judicial murders of the French Revolution, and sarcastically to suggest a favourable comparison between them and the slaughter in some great victory for which *Te Deums* are sung. These evils are not to be measured or compared by the summary processes of arithmetic. The conscience of mankind draws a right distinction between death in the shock of battle, "the equal death" of contending heroes, and the indiscriminate "doing to death" of the helpless, whether it be by the blind fury of a mob, or through the reckless rage of an anarchist, or under the cold-blooded policy of a tyrant. Foulon may have deserved death a thousand times more than Nelson; yet who would compare the scene in the cockpit of the *Victory* with that before the Hotel de Ville, or the murder of the Duc d'Enghien with the death of Wolfe? I make no assumption as to where the moral responsibility lies for reigns of terror, for popular tumults, for devastating strikes which bring hunger and death into thousands of helpless homes, but I say that the miseries wrought by these works of the horseman who takes peace from the earth are morally more shocking than



those which attend the progress of the conqueror, even if they be not in sum and substance more woeful. And these ills, too, are with us, and are to abide with us as long as sin abides. They, too, are the "works of the devil," as hereafter in this book we shall see, and till he is destroyed from the earth they are indestructible. The lesson the prophecy teaches is not a passive acquiescence, a fatalistic acceptance of these things as a part of the necessary ills that flesh is heir to. It is, on the contrary, a trumpet-call in the name of Christ to "manfully fight under His banner, against sin, the world, and the devil; and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto our life's end" (*Baptismal Service*).

A third class of woes mentioned in the prophecy of Christ consisted of "famines . . . in divers places" (Matt. 247). In the third rider we behold the spirit of this species of judgement going forth on his black horse. We can scarcely be wrong in including under the description of famine not only the exceptional visitations so designated, which are so much more common in the East than in the West, but also all the pains and distresses of want, all the grievous hardships of the poor, who are always with us. For the penniless there is famine, however abundant



the supply around. Nay, starvation amidst plenty, starvation side by side with profligate luxury and waste, is inexpressibly more shocking in its kind than that which befalls all together. And this misery, too, like those that went before, is in the world because of sin. If hatred and anger bring forth wars and murders, greed is the mother of poverty; and as long as the causes continue, the results will follow, in spite of all the deliberations of committees and all the schemes of economists. But in this case a word of comfort comes forth from the throne which checks despair. Of old God had said, "While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest . . . shall not cease" (Gen. 8<sup>22</sup>). He may, in judgment, send times of special want; He will not restrain the operation of those moral laws, the infringement of which fills the world with chronic hunger; but He is faithful to the covenant of the "bow in the cloud." He "watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater" (Isa. 55<sup>10</sup>). On the whole, it is not in vain that we trust that "the Lord will provide." And so here in this vision we read of a restraining power. The seer heard a voice from the throne say, *A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see*



that thou hurt not the oil and the wine. The prices thus defined are such as to afford a bare daily subsistence in return for a daily wage. The suggestion is one of poverty, rather than of famine in its ordinary sense; and it is true in its application to the world in all ages. It is noteworthy that the luxuries, "wine and oil," are excepted from the measured distribution by balance. May it be that the picture is designed to set forth the continuance through the ages of wealth and want side by side? If so, again its truth to fact is undeniable; and it serves as a weighty reminder to all who are impatiently evolving schemes for remedying the inequalities of the world, that the true remedy is the coming of the kingdom of Christ. He, and He only, can right the wrongs of the world; He alone can take away its sorrow, because He alone can purge its sin.

The fourth rider, he on the pale or livid horse, is named by the seer **Death**, and **Hades** followed him. He wields the power of inflicting those ills which Ezekiel called God's "four sore judgments" (14<sup>21</sup>). We should, perhaps, regard this last rider in the train, as in a sense the attendant on the rest; though, at the same time, he has a jurisdiction all his own. Death follows wars and strifes and famines, but has other resources than these. And whatever other forms of woe



in the world we may hope to expel, this is one before which all philosophy despairs. The politician may dream of exorcising the spirit of conflict, and the economist that of want, by the exercise of their respective crafts. We believe their dreams are vain,—that, as we have said, Christ only can conquer these foes of the human race. But be that as it may, certain is it that only He can vanquish “the last enemy.” For this consummation, which alone can dry the tears and stifle the sighs of the world, at least we must call on Him, joining our voices with those of all created life in the cry, “Come.” And here we further learn that the authority of this dread monarch is, after all, only exercised on sufferance. His power was given him; and its limits are defined. He may not destroy beyond the extent prescribed. As the spirit of famine and want was the subject of a restraining voice, so Death has a limit set to his kingdom. It is, as it were, but a fourth part of the earth that he controls.

Here, then, we have already an epitome, in a sense complete, of the sombre side of human history, a symbolical setting forth of the facts with which every age and every land has been so sadly familiar. Such, we are told, is the fate of the world even while the Almighty rules.



The roll which expounds the mystery is not even yet unsealed. For the present, it must suffice for us to know that God suffers it to be so. We must live as on a battlefield. This thought we shall find in almost every chapter of this book. Its message to us is to be sure we are on the right side, and to be of good courage. Even yet we have not reached the darkest shade of this prophecy of conflict and pain and death; but at this point the form of the symbolism changes. What has yet to be seen and heard is of special moment to the Church of God. The former ills were common to all men; those which are next to be disclosed concern only the children of the kingdom, and the revelation is set forth in imagery specially significant in its consolation.

Again referring to the prophecy of Christ, we remember that He foretold the persecutions and martyrdoms, for His name's sake, which should at once afflict and purify His Church. The opening of the fifth seal brings us to the same point in this vision. The seer beholds as it were in the heavenly temple a great altar of sacrifice, corresponding to that brazen altar before the earthly sanctuary on which the victims were slain, and at the foot of which their blood was poured out (Ex. 29<sup>12</sup>). Scripture



often reminds us that "the blood is the life"; and here it is so interpreted. Beneath the altar are seen the souls or "lives" (in Greek the word is the same) of them that were slain for the word of God. "They loved not their lives unto the death" (ch. 12<sup>11</sup>); and their blood is remembered by Him on the throne. Their cry reminds us of the promise of the Saviour in which He applies the parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18<sup>7,8</sup>). In form the words have the appearance of being a prayer for vengeance, quite out of harmony with the dispensation of love, and in striking contrast with the spirit actually displayed by its first martyr, whose latest breath passed in prayer for his murderers (Acts 7<sup>60</sup>). But it is not at all necessary to attribute to them any such personal sense. If they express impatience, it is a holy impatience, which we would all share, at the strangely protracted power of sin; a longing for the discords of creation to be silenced. We cannot pray "Thy kingdom come" without in a sense praying for the destruction of the obdurate and rebellious. The prayer of the martyrs, we believe, is no more than this. There must, however, be patience in heaven as on earth for a little season. Their reward has already begun,—white robes were given to every one of them, for each one is a notable victor,—but they must wait



the Lord's time for their perfect reward, for the ultimate reunion of the whole of the "white-robed army." It was a prophecy to St. John and those of his age that a conflict unto death was before many of them; that fire and sword must be braved for the testimony which they held. It may be a prophecy that such times will again befall the Church. There are many scriptures which speak of the latest age as the most awful of all in tribulation and conflict. The spirit of the world is as truly as ever at enmity with God. The seed of the serpent hates as intensely as ever the seed of the woman. For a while a latitudinarian indifference, a contemptuous toleration, is the attitude of this worldliness. But given certain circumstances, it is quite capable of rising again with the fury of a Nero or a Domitian, or of carrying a callous policy to the same lengths as a Diocletian. Meanwhile,—the "offence of the cross" has not for a moment ceased. The world tolerates, and even patronises, the term Christian; but it detests Christlikeness, and has a hundred weapons of resistance to raise against it.

The opening of the sixth seal necessarily brings us in contemplation near to the last days; and the prophecy is one of darkness and terror, still closely corresponding to the final predictions



of Christ. He had spoken of earthquakes (Matt. 247) as attending the wars, famines, and pestilences which were among the earlier signs of the coming kingdom. He spoke also of the darkening of the sun and moon (*ib.* v. 29), the falling of stars, and the shaking of heaven, as the immediate precursors of the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens. In both cases the imagery is a reproduction of ancient prophecy (Joel 231, Hag. 26, Isa. 344). Perhaps it is hopeless to attempt a more detailed interpretation than that which regards these symbols as expressive of an utmost aggravation of wordly trouble; a "great tribulation," which shall bring despair to all the rulers of the earth; as indicating the approach of a period (and are there not even now premonitions of it?) when the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men will despair of the efficacy of every political and philosophic specific for the ills of the world, and will in their ultimate helplessness recognise the irremediable woes around them as evidences of the **wrath of the Lamb**. The conviction of the Divine Presence is represented here, as in the words of our Lord (Luke 2330), as evoking the language of terror uttered long before by Hosea (108). There is "a fear of the Lord," which is "the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 11110). But



such solemn passages as these remind us that the beginning may come too late, if postponed to that swiftly passing moment when there is no more time for it to bring forth the fruit of repentance, when it is but the fulfilment of the long-unheeded warning, and the "certain fearful looking for of judgement and fiery indignation" (Heb. 10<sup>27</sup>).

In the Gospel prophecy, the Saviour, immediately after speaking of the signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars, of the distress of nations and perplexity, of men's hearts failing them for fear, as indications of His immediate advent, adds a prophecy of His mindfulness of His own in these times of storm and stress. We read (Matt. 24<sup>31</sup>, Mark 13<sup>27</sup>): "He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." In the seventh chapter we reach the same point and meet with almost the same imagery in the apocalyptic vision. We read of angels sent forth to restrain the destroying powers until another angel should have set the seal of God on the foreheads of His servants. As in Ezekiel (9<sup>4-6</sup>), this marking of the saints is the assurance of their security amidst the woes of judgement. Not only for the elects'



sake are the days of sorrow shortened, but in the midst of the plagues a special guardianship protects them. There is material for reflection in the description of the sealed as in number one hundred and forty-four thousand, and as chosen from the tribes of the children of Israel. Two questions are thus suggested for solution: first, whether the one hundred and forty and four thousand symbolically designates the whole Church, being in effect equivalent to the **great multitude which no man can number** immediately afterwards mentioned? secondly, whether the mention of the tribes is to be interpreted in a literal or spiritual sense? These are matters on which, as on many others which will arise in these prophecies, it is impossible to speak confidently. One's first impulse would be to suppose an intentional contrast to be suggested between the limited number and the innumerable multitude, and the thought at once presents itself as to whether the former figure may not relate only to the generation alive in the last times. A comparison with the same figures when they recur in chapter 14 scarcely helps us, for it would seem quite as doubtful there as here whether the symbol stands for the whole triumphant Church, or only for a number within the Church specially glorified



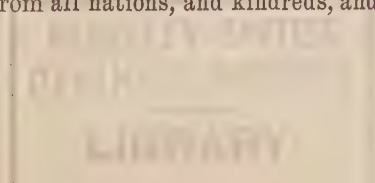
because of a special faithfulness, the more honourable, it may be, because of special trial. On the whole, we shall perhaps be on safer ground, and shall choose an interpretation more harmonious with the tenor of this book and of Scripture generally, if we distrust first impressions, and the suggestion of any marked distinctions in the host of the glorified, and regard the two descriptions as the same in denotation, the innumerable multitude being, in fact, the interpretation of the symbolic figure. It needs no argument or illustration to sustain the view that the number used is suggestive of two thoughts,—completeness and magnitude. Again and again the number 12 and its multiples are introduced in connexion with the triumphant Church. We have already read of the four-and-twenty elders; we shall hereafter read of the twelve foundations, and the twelve gates of the city of God. The square of 12 multiplied a thousandfold may well be taken, then, to signify the great multitude viewed in the light of its heavenly perfection and completeness,—the very same white-robed army which, from an earthly point of view, is beyond the reach of human enumeration.

If this be so, it follows that the mention of the tribes of Israel must also be spiritually



regarded, as is surely the case in the twenty-first chapter; and to this we are the more readily inclined, as, on the one hand, the very definiteness of the figures forbids a strictly literal interpretation, and, on the other, the enumeration of the tribes themselves lacks precision, the name of Dan being unaccountably omitted, while that of Levi, which took no geographical share of the Holy Land, is included. So to read the passage is but to add one more to the number of those in which the chosen Israel of old is referred to as typical of the whole multitude of God's ultimately chosen people. And, moreover, it is confirmed by the Hebrew character of the imagery which follows in the next paragraph, which certainly relates to the whole company of the saved.

The vision before us has led us, then, up to the very point of the final judgement. But judgement is not its theme. The future prophecies of this book will, with an increasing force and fulness, set forth the solemn procedure of "the great assize." Here it is passed by, and our thoughts are suddenly, almost abruptly, summoned from the final throes of human history to the glorious commencement of the new and eternal era. The seer perceives a rejoicing and countless host, gathered from all nations, and kindreds, and people,





and tongues, standing before the throne, and before the Lamb, who still holds in His hand the folded roll, fastened even now by one remaining seal. It is the first communion of the whole Catholic Church, gathered from every age as well as from every land. Their robes are robes of victory, white as no fuller on earth could whiten them. In each hand is a feathery palm. To the Gentile reader this seems but a further emblem of victory or success. But to the Jew there would be a much deeper significance in such a scene. He could scarcely fail to recall the precepts of the law by which the Feast of Tabernacles was enjoined. "In the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the Lord seven days: on the first day shall be a Sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a Sabbath. And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. . . . Ye shall dwell in booths seven days. . . . that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (Lev. 23<sup>39ff.</sup>).

The Feast of Tabernacles was a prophecy as



well as a commemoration. It called to mind the breaking of the yoke of bondage and the forty years of desert wandering, when they dwelt in tents of pilgrimage. It was also a harvest thanksgiving for the garnered fruits of the land of rest and promise. It was, further, a type of entry on that "rest remaining" of which St. John now sees in vision the fulfilment. The waving palms are memorials of the days of conflict and tribulation for ever past. It is the "first day" of the heavenly feast and Sabbath, the harvest-home of the whole company of the saved which the reapers have gathered into the everlasting garner. No wonder that the theme of their song is Salvation, as the rainbow about the throne reminds them of the storm and flood that have been passed, and the "season of clear shining" which is nevermore to pass away; no wonder that in "a sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies" they ascribe **Blessing and glory and wisdom, and thanksgiving and honour and power, unto God for ever and ever.** Small wonder, either, that the entranced and bewildered saint failed to recognise in that radiant throng the companions of his persecuted faith. As he knew them in their pilgrimage, they had worn tear-stained faces, often lined with anxious thought or clouded with perplexity and doubt.



Now, all sorrow and sighing has fled away, the Almighty hand has for ever dried their tears; there is no more thought of death; there is no more curse. The rejoicing multitude is the "bride adorned for her husband"; their days of patience and tribulation are left behind; their robes are white for evermore. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and He that sitteth upon the throne shall dwell among them.

The eternal day without night has then begun; yet still the roll bears one confining seal: the mystery of the earthly life and probation is still unrevealed. But now the time has come for the perfect justification of the ways of God to man, for the disclosure of those secrets of which the Saviour when on earth had said, "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." The Lamb of God breaks the seventh seal; the roll is spread; and the vision closes with a solemn stillness. Every eye of the great multitude is fixed on that long-hoped-for explanation of all that had bewildered them below. The very voice of praise for a while is hushed, as every faculty is absorbed in thought and wonder. The book of that revelation which had been given for guidance in the desert wanderings and conflict is closed. The



new revelation, adapted to the eternal heavenly life, is opened, and "praise sits silent on their tongues"; but only as it were for a little space. We read not here of the recommencement of the songs and of the changed service of that other life; but the seer tells us of them in connexion with later visions: "They follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth," and "they shall reign for ever and ever."

So we reach the close of the first great division of the prophetic and apocalyptic portion of the book,—the first symbolic horoscope of human history, which is immediately to be followed by another, and yet another. It is scarcely necessary to recapitulate the lessons which it teaches,—the guidance of all things here below, which seem to us so inextricably and hopelessly confused, by a hand of Almighty power, a mind of infinite wisdom; the preparation above of a rest which remaineth, of a "far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory"; the ever-watchful guardianship and care which keeps the sealed and faithful safe through every storm and stress. Could any thoughts be more helpful to a suffering Church than those thus emphasized? How could a trembling faith be better encouraged, a wavering hope more surely renewed? To them who first received such an apocalypse the revealing word



must have been sweet as honey and the honeycomb. To us, in our calmer days, it is very far from being voiceless. There may be days of tribulation yet to come, when the Church again will need all its mighty help, when no Scripture will be more precious than that which tells of the throne set in heaven, and the rainbow round about the throne.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since the above words were written, all Christendom has been horror-stricken with the news of the atrocities of persecution in Armenia. We can well believe that the prophecy of this book may speak to the martyrs and confessors of Erzeroum with a force which cannot easily be realised by us who worship, each under his vine and fig tree, none daring to make us afraid. And who can say whereunto these things may grow?



## CHAPTER IV.

### THE SEVEN TRUMPETS.

(Chs. 8-11.)

#### I. THE INTRODUCTION.

(Ch. 8-6.)

**I**N the second verse of the eighth chapter we enter on the description of a second vision, which we regard as, like the first, embracing in its purview the whole period of the Church's history, and which, extending as it does over four chapters, brings into prominence many characteristics of that history not fully disclosed by the previous symbolism. There are, as we shall see, many points of resemblance between the two prophecies. The order of events and the particular arrangement of their disclosure have much in common, and both lead us up, through a series of conflicts and woes, to the contemplation of the triumph of Christ and the glorious worship of the temple in heaven. The outline of the



revelation is the same; the filling up is in the present case more full of detail, and, it must be admitted, more difficult of interpretation. Still, with watchfulness and patience, we may hope for instruction and comfort even amidst this more involved and mysterious imagery. We shall find in the Old Testament a key that will fit many of its secrets.

The scene of the vision is the same as in that of the seven seals. The seer is still in heaven. We may probably take it that the throne remains set as described in the fourth chapter: girt with the rainbow, compassed with the four-and-twenty thrones, and reflected in the sea of glass. Into this arena, if we may so speak, the prophet beholds the entry of the seven angels which stand before God, unto whom were given seven trumpets. The mention of these seven angels embodies a reference to a conception of the later Jewish theology which finds expression in Tobit 12<sup>15</sup>,<sup>1</sup> and which possibly was a development of an obscure expression in the writings of Zechariah (4<sup>10</sup>). It is not necessary to regard their mention here as in fact confirming the apocryphal idea. The vision is cast in the terms

<sup>1</sup> "I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels which present the prayers of the saints, and which go in and out before the glory of the Holy One."



of the current thoughts of the time, and we read it as everywhere symbolical of spiritual truths, not as declaratory of objective facts in the unseen world.

The Old Testament often makes mention of the trumpet,—sometimes as the means of summoning to prayer, sometimes as the instrument of martial signal. Only once is there express mention of seven trumpets, but that is in connexion with one of the greatest scenes of triumph of Jewish history ; and, having regard to the fact that the verses which follow repeatedly remind us of the conflicts and deliverances of Israel, we are encouraged to suppose that the coincidence in the number is by no means accidental. It was on the occasion of the first armed entry on the Promised Land that Joshua was bidden to furnish seven priests with seven trumpets, that they might compass the walls of Jericho seven times, and blow with the trumpets. These were to be the only weapons of their warfare before that great city ; and at the last long blast and the shout of the people, its strong walls fell flat, and every man went up straight before him (Josh. 6<sup>4,5</sup>). The memory of that strange and glorious day might well be evoked as a thought aptly preparatory to those now about to be revealed. We are to hear of wonders wrought by God upon



the earth. We remember the condition of the Church to which the vision was proclaimed. In their circumstances, the very mention of the fact and the mode of the triumph over Jericho would have been in itself an inspiration of hope. It would forbid the thought of helplessness, and prepare the heart for the revelation of the Divine intervention which follows.

We read, in the vision of the seven seals, of the sea of glass before the throne, and discerned in it a reference to the brazen altar of sacrifice, which itself was expressly mentioned on the opening of the fifth seal. Now we see that other, the golden altar of incense, whereon in the old economy were symbolically offered the prayers of the congregation. It is closely in harmony with the whole scheme of this book that this further portion of the ancient temple furniture should be disclosed as eternally existing in the heavens. It was another lesson preparatory to the dismantling and destruction of the earthly shrine. We have already read of the seven golden candlesticks, of the cherubim, of the great altar; we shall soon hear of the ark of the Testament as established on high. So were the hearts of Jewish converts to be gently weaned from their passionate attachment to the "holy places made with hands" and the city which was passing



away, by the lifting up of their thoughts to that "which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

In the passage from the Book of Tobit already referred to, Raphael is described as presenting the prayers of the saints; and here we read of **another angel** as exercising a similar priestly office. He adds the fragrance of the heavenly incense to the supplications which come up from the sufferers on earth, and together they **ascended up before God out of the angel's hand**. We need scarcely pause here to say that such imagery as this must not be so pressed as to serve as a foundation for the doctrine of there being any other intercession in heaven than that of the one High Priest. We are scarcely to seek in the symbolism of these visions for what we may call technical theological teaching. They are not designed to be didactic in that sense. Suffice it for us here to be reminded that our sincere prayers do really enter heaven, and that, whatsoever their imperfection, provision is made above for their acceptance by the All-holy. This is one lesson of utmost comfort; there follows one of equal solemnity. The very same censer from which the incense rose is immediately used for casting fire upon the earth; and this is the signal for the commencement of a whole series



of devastating woes. At once **the seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound.** The thought is thus suggested, that our petitions for deliverance and for mercy for the Church, the very prayer "Thy kingdom come," is in effect a supplication for the judgement and condemnation of sin. Such prayer can only be sincerely offered by such as are themselves in the ark of safety, who are securely housed in the "strong tower" of the holy Name. Vengeance is the Lord's, and not ours; but the salvation of the elect involves the overthrow of the rejected. The thought may inspire us with such patience as was in the last vision enjoined on the martyred souls which cried with a loud voice from beneath the altar, and must impress on us a consideration as to the terrible seriousness of wielding the mighty power of prayer. The throne of grace which we approach is also the throne of judgement, from which, as from Sinai, proceed voices and thunderings and lightnings.

## II. THE FIRST FOUR TRUMPETS.

(Ch. 87-13.)

As in the vision of the seals, so here, the first four of the series of seven have a common character, and are distinguished from the three



which follow. And there is this further resemblance, that there is a pause or interlude before the signal for the last. These facts suggest the division of the subject which we adopt.

We have already seen in the very mention of the seven trumpets, an allusion to one great event of Israel's history; but not until the sounding of the last did the walls of Jericho fall down; and so here, not until the seventh angel blows is the point of victory reached. Each one that precedes is but a preparatory signal, though each is productive of mighty results. The phenomena attending the first four carry back our thoughts to an earlier point in the story of the Hebrew deliverance,—to the very commencement, in fact, of the Divine intervention on their behalf against the oppressing tyranny of Egypt. Here again, as in the Lord's controversy with Pharaoh, we read of **hail and fire** from heaven falling in destruction upon the earth; but in this case with the added horror that they are **mingled with blood**, which intensifies its miraculous character. Then again we read of a judgement of God upon the waters: first the sea became blood, then the rivers and fountains became **wormwood**; so that here also the general reminiscence of the first plague is modified by differences, and added to it are glances at other



ancient scriptures. Lastly, we read of a plague of darkness falling on the sun, moon, and stars. In every case the judgement is said to affect but a third part of that on which it falls; and as in the case of the ten days of ch. 2<sup>10</sup>, and the restriction imposed on the power of Death and Hades in ch. 6<sup>8</sup>, the suggestion is that of a limited, not yet a final, judgement.

Now, we note that these plagues are in terms expressed to fall upon the objects of physical creation,—the earth, the sea, the rivers, the sun, moon, and stars. But the passage itself contains other elements, which more than hint to us what in fact, on merely general grounds, we should have expected, namely, that the prophecy is to be interpreted as symbolical. For instance, not only are the plagues of Egypt brought before our minds, but on the sounding of the second trumpet the seer beheld as it were a great mountain burning with fire cast into the sea. This at once directs our thoughts to the burden of the prophecy of Jeremiah against Babylon. In Jer. 51<sup>25</sup> we read: "Behold, I am against thee, O destroying mountain, saith the Lord, which destroyest all the earth, and I will stretch out Mine hand upon thee, and roll thee down from the rocks, and will make thee a burnt mountain." Again, on the sounding of the third angel, there



fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp . . . and the name of the star was called Wormwood. Again our thoughts are thrown back on Old Testament prophecies of doom against the foes of the Israel of God, and we recall the words, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" (Isa. 14<sup>12</sup>). These reminiscences of Jewish history and Jewish prophecy all serve as clues to the, at first sight, perplexing imagery before us. They could scarcely have other effect on the minds of St. John and his first readers than that of reminding them of the strenuous conflicts of Israel's history,—a history of chequered character, but full of proofs of the might of the saving King who was in their midst, and who, in the days of their fidelity, was a sure defence against foes, however strong, however many. That history we have been long accustomed to regard as in itself a parable and a prophecy, full of instruction as a type of the Church which was to be.

In expounding the vision of the seven seals, we had occasion to refer to it as a re-enunciation, as it were, of Christ's great prophecy of the last days. Have we not here, also, a reiteration of the same prediction, in other terms and with other imagery? The Saviour spoke of wars and



rumours of wars,—in other words, of an age of conflict; He portrayed the course of history as a struggle, the triumph and peace of heaven as its goal. The symbolism used in connexion with these four trumpets, and, as we shall see, still more clearly in connexion with those that follow, is of a character which well depicts the consequences of war and tumult. The devastation of the earth as by fire and hail, the pouring out of blood, the impoverishing of the nations, aptly implied by the corruption of the rivers, common symbols of the sources of wealth; and, lastly, that gloom and sorrow of peoples, which the mind of Isaiah associated with the darkness of the heavens in the words, “If one look unto the earth, behold darkness and sorrow; and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof” (Isa. 530),—all these have again and again had their fulfilment in human history; and we might almost wonder how the race has escaped so far as it has the consequences of its quarrels and its crimes, but for the memory that there is over all a restraining and guiding Providence, which forbids that more than one-third of the earth, or the sea, or the sky, so to speak, should be reached by the woes which assail them. To us, whose knowledge of the calamities of war is happily but derived from books, whose imagination has



no sad help from experience, and almost as little from expectation, the practical instruction and comfort of such a scripture are comparatively ineffective. But for many peoples and generations of the past, the circumstances have been very different; and to them such strange depictions may well have brought strength to bear in patience, to suffer without loss of hope.

### III. THE FIFTH AND SIXTH TRUMPETS.

(Chs. 8<sup>13-9.</sup>)

Whatever be the precise nature of the calamities symbolised by the previous references to natural phenomena, there can scarcely be a doubt as to the significance of the signs which attend the sounding of the fifth and the sixth angels. Here there is clearly a portrayal of an ever-increasing aggravation of conflict, and its consequential sorrows. And the seer is warned of the terrors about to be revealed by the voice of the flying eagle, which cried, Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, by reason of the voices of the trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!

On the sounding of the fifth trumpet, the prophet beheld a star fallen from heaven, to whom was given the key of the abyss. In the



first chapter of this book, possibly—at anyrate in Jewish writings, sacred and apocryphal (Job 387, Enoch 1816, etc.)—the angels are spoken of under the similitude of stars; and there is little difficulty, therefore, in interpreting this figure. In the true reading of the original, we find that St. John does not say he saw the fall of the star: he saw it already fallen from heaven to earth. But another speaks of that fall as a witness: “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven” (Luke 1018); and in a later vision there is again reference to the conquest and casting out of the rebellious angel (129). Here, then, we learn, that to the other judgements which have already fallen upon the earth are to be added the works of the malice and malignity of the great foe of God and man, who is called the devil and Satan. This revelation is further developed in the visions which follow, and we shall read more of the fearful deeds of this spiritual enemy. Here we learn that a power was for a while given to him like that bestowed on the rider on the red horse, who came forth on the breaking of the second seal. He was to “take peace from the earth.” From the smoke of the abyss came forth locusts upon the earth. Once more the calamities of Egypt are called to our memory, but again there are elements of horror added to



those of the ancient plague. To the natural destructive power of locusts is joined the poisonous might of scorpions. Power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power; so that pain and death as well as destruction and famine follow their visitation. We have an interpreter of the symbol in the prophet Joel (1 6, 7 23-5, 7, 10), who in the same imagery described the horrors of a hostile invasion. Moreover, here the continuation of the description still further tends to show that the march of fierce armies was the real subject of the vision. The shapes of the locusts were like horses prepared unto battle; their faces were as the faces of men, and they had hair as the hair of women; and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. After reading such a description, one can scarcely evade the thought of an irruption of barbarian hosts; and if such be the true interpretation, history has many dark pages which tell of more than one fulfilment. Wave after wave of ruthless Northern foes swept over the face of the Roman world in the centuries soon to follow the prophet's words. In later days, the Arab horsemen of Mohammed renewed the work of destruction; and in other regions, the Tartar hordes of Ghenghis Khan wrought similar evil. There seems to be no necessity for particularly specify-



ing any one or other of these scourges as the exact fulfilment of the words; and the attempts at such identification, though characterised by abundant ingenuity, are far from convincing. In our view, the prophecy was intended to cover them all, in the same way in which we have ventured to interpret the riders on the white and red horses, in the vision of the seals, as the embodiment of war and discord. But here we have the further important thought, that Satan exercises a direct agency in many of these ills which smite the earth with a curse. "The locusts," the wise man tells us, "have no king" (Prov. 30<sup>27</sup>); but these symbolical locusts have. Not only do they swarm forth from the smoke of the abyss, but the angel of the abyss is at their head, and bears the name Abaddon, or, in Greek, Apollyon, the Destroyer. The affliction which they bring is described as so severe as to cause men to seek death as the only refuge; and yet here also we are taught that the malignant power is subject to restraint: the judgement is not final. It is limited in time: for we read that the power of the foes was to hurt men five months; it is controlled in degree: it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those which have not the seal of



God in their foreheads. Applying the principle more than once indicated, we would refrain from attempting to explain specifically the terms of these limitations. As a matter of fact, we know that the sealed of God are exposed, in common with others, to the perils and horrors of war, and of all the other ills which assail the earth in which they live. But, after all, they have the assurance that He that is for them is more than all that can be against them. Their exemption is not from physical woes, but is real nevertheless. We are again reminded of the Master's promise, wrapped though it be in paradox: "Ye shall be betrayed . . . and some of you shall they cause to be put to death; and ye shall be hated of all men for My name's sake. But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your patience ye shall win your lives" (Luke 21<sup>16ff.</sup>). So here, by vision, He encourages His own. Calamities, deaths, and desolations are no proof that God has forgotten or forsaken the earth. The throne is there, and He that sits thereon, and He still is mindful of His own; but it would seem that the casting out of Satan from the world involves rending and tearing like that of the dumb and deaf spirit which yielded to the voice of Christ in Galilee. One of the three woes denounced by the fly-



ing eagle was thus accomplished. Yet two remain.

The sixth angel sounded; and the blast was the signal for the letting loose of another afflicting power, hitherto divinely restrained. The voice, which proceeded from the horns of the golden altar, reminds us of that voice from beneath the brazen altar, of which we read in ch. 6<sup>a</sup>. But there the cry was expressive of the holy impatience of the righteous dead at the delayed triumph of righteousness. Here the command seems rather a response to the prayer of the living for deliverance. The mention of four angels recalls those of ch. 7<sup>1</sup>, who also were restrained from a mission of judgement on sinners until the coming of the set time. But in this case the language of the prophecy locates them, not in the four corners of the earth, but in the great river Euphrates, where they were prepared for the coming of the hour and the day and the month and the year foreseen by the Omniscient. The mention of the Euphrates would suggest to a Jew, more directly than it does to us, the eastern boundary of the ancient Hebrew typical kingdom, which severed them from the most persistent enemies of their later days,—whether Assyrian, Chaldean, or Persian,—whither they were wont to look with a per-



petual fear of those hosts now and again let loose in judgement. And perhaps here the name implies no more definite thought than that of the "far country," "the end of heaven," where the "Lord of hosts mustereth the host of battle," "and the weapons of His indignation" (Isa. 13<sup>4, 5</sup>).

Then we are told of the bursting forth of an inconceivably great and terrible force of cavalry. The number of the army of the horsemen were two hundred thousand thousand. I heard the number of them. But yet again, though the woe is a judgement from God, it is not final, but limited and restrained: but a **third part of men** fall before it. The concluding verses of the chapter tell us who were the objects of this destructive plague. It was a manifestation of the anger of God against sinners; but we read that in this case, as in that of the chastised Pharaoh, the blows of wrath resulted not in repentance, but in a hardening of the heart. In this respect history sadly confirms the prophecy. Often have the nations of the world been smitten with one or other of God's judgements, and have cried against Him in futile rage, rather than listened to the rod, and besought His mercy. We have read of plague-smitten cities in which the moans of the dying have been



drowned in the drunken cries of an aggravated and horrible revelry. It was so in Florence in 1348, and in London in 1665. We have read of a ribald politician exclaiming, amidst the ruins of chastised but not humbled Paris in 1871, "If there be a God, I would like to meet and stab Him!" If, then, we despair of finding specific fulfilments of the mysterious scenes here revealed, if such there be, they still bring us instruction, for they disclose the eternal principles of God's government, and they are a revelation of the heart of man, which is desperately wicked. They speak of a consuming anger against sin; but, at the same time, the long delay of final overthrow is proof that God willeth not the death of the sinner. The burning wrath has been for ages restrained, that chastisement may break down human pride, or words of mercy woo the stubborn heart. But the truth remains, engraved as in eternal brass, that though the first and second woe be past, and sin and Satan remain undestroyed, a third woe, a final judgement, must fall at last: the honour of God and His righteousness must and will be vindicated. He must reign, and those who will remain His enemies must be trampled beneath His feet.



## IV. THE PAUSE.

(Chs. 10-11<sup>14</sup>.)

We have remarked, that as between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals there was a change in the course of the symbolism, so it is in the interval between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets. In the former vision we read at this point of the sealing of the elect ere the speaking of the final word of history. Here our thoughts are turned from the revelations of the wrath of God to the proclamation of His mercy, which sounds through all the ages simultaneously with the voice of His anger. Like the corresponding interruption in the vision of the sealed roll, this also is divisible into two parts: the first describing the mighty angel with the open roll; the second, the measuring of the temple, and the preaching of the two witnesses in the holy city.

We read in the fifth chapter of a mighty angel in connexion with the sealed roll of the previous vision. Here the ministrant may be the same, but obviously the significance of the writing is different. The roll, or rather the little roll, is in this case open,—now ready to be seen and read; but, before referring to its teaching, the narrator pauses to speak of the voices of



the seven thunders, and the solemn oath of the angel. More than once in Holy Writ the voice of God is compared with thunder (Ps. 29 3, John 12 28, 29); and here the suggestion may be the same. It is vain, however, to speculate as to what the utterance was. On other occasions the seer was bidden to write the things which he saw and heard, but on this he was forbidden. It is implied that the thunder-voice was articulate and understood; but its words were for him and not for us. On the contrary, the proclamation of the angel which follows has a message for all time. Standing at once upon the sea and upon the earth, as if in symbolic representation of the universal sovereignty of Him whom he served, he swore by Him that liveth for ever and ever . . . that there should be no longer time. Often these words have been invested with a strange sense, as if their purpose had been to mark the contrast between the present æon and the day of eternity which is to follow; and we have been taught to speak of that future as the age in which "time shall be no more." The real significance of the expression, however, has nothing of this mystic, not to say irrational, character. What we call time is but one aspect of what we call eternity; and we can form no manner of conception of eternity apart from our



experience of time. What the angel declared was, that there should be no more delay. His voice is an echo of that of the ancient prophet who was commanded to proclaim: "The days are at hand, and the effect of every vision" (Ezek. 12<sup>23</sup>). We have been reading of successive judgements, terrible in severity, yet restrained and limited in operation. Lest any should suppose that all history was but to lie in eternally recurring cycles of destruction and reconstruction, this voice prepares the way for the voice of the seventh angel, and the revelation of the final woe, when the mystery of God shall be finished, as He hath declared to His servants the prophets. The voice is one of mingled joy and sorrow. For the elect, the sealed, it heralds the age of rest, reunion, and perfected redemption. For the rebellious, it is the final warning of the irrevocable sentence of destruction from the presence of the Lord.

This double character of the present message is further illustrated in the remaining verses of the chapter. The prophet was bidden to **take and eat the roll** that lay open in the angel's hand. The symbolism is a repetition of that of Ezekiel's vision. He too received the like command, and ate up the roll wherein were written lamentations and mourning and woe



(chs. 2<sup>10</sup> 3<sup>1,3</sup>); and he too found it in his mouth as honey for sweetness. St. John tells us that when he had eaten it his belly was bitter. In the earlier prophecy, though we have not precisely the same language, we have a similar thought; for when Ezekiel was caught up and borne along for the fulfilment of his mission, he tell us he "went in bitterness and in the heat of his spirit" (3<sup>14</sup>). The parable is scarcely difficult to read. The message of the seer was one of prophecy to many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings (Rev. 10<sup>11</sup>). The roll was doubtless the writing of the word he was to utter. Before he could speak its solemn truths in Jehovah's name, it was necessary that he should, as it were, eat it up; his whole soul was to be filled with the sense of its dreadful reality and importance. So, indeed, Ezekiel received the interpretation: "All My words that I shall speak unto thee *receive in thine heart*, and hear with thine ears; and go . . . unto the children of thy people, and speak unto them, and tell them, Thus saith the Lord God" (Ezek. 3<sup>2,3,10,11</sup>). That man should be honoured with such a trust, should be a minister of the word of God, can but be felt to be a precious privilege. Like Jeremiah, everyone who realises the fact that he is for a time God's angel will be ready to



cry, "Thy word is unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." Yet who that has a heart of love can read the roll, and proclaim to a hardened world its awful prophecy, without sighing and bitterness of spirit? The prophet is not called to prophesy smooth things; he is to declare the whole counsel of that God who is a consuming fire. Before the Lord's first advent, a preacher was sent to warn the earth to flee from the wrath to come. What St. John the Baptist then proclaimed, St. John the Evangelist in this book repeats, and sends the words echoing through the ages, as the herald of that Second Advent for whose signal—the trump of God, the seventh angel's voice—the whole creation travaileth in pain.

But before reaching this concluding scene of the vision, we have other symbols to consider and interpret. First, the seer is bidden to rise and measure the temple of God. Again we are reminded of Ezekiel's prophecy (40<sup>2,3</sup>), wherein the measurement is introductory to the assurance to Israel of a swift and certain restoration of their forfeited political liberty and religious privilege. The significance of this reminder of the ancient promise is apparent, and marks one more point of similarity between this vision and that of the seals. There we read of the



sealing of the servants of God in their foreheads, that they might be marked for security before the sending forth of the latest woes upon the earth. And as we then referred to Christ's prophecy of the last days, and to the gathering together of the elect from the four winds (Matt. 24<sup>31</sup>), which He foretold, so we must again, for the elucidation of the present scene. St. Paul guides us to the spiritual interpretation of the temple when he speaks of the Church as "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone: in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2<sup>19-21</sup>); and yet more explicitly, "The temple of God is holy; which temple ye are" (1 Cor. 3<sup>17</sup>). To a Hebrew Christian the revelation was as full of comfort as it is to all of profound instruction. It was one more emphatic assurance of the fulfilment, in the glory of a brighter dispensation, of the venerable types so hallowed by sacred memories. The visible Zion might be compassed with armies, the material temple cast down so that not one stone was left upon another; but the archetype is eternal in the heavens. The teaching is that often enunciated in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Church of the living God



may in a sense share in the plagues which the sins of the world bring upon it, yet is it ever the beloved object of the solicitude of the Almighty. "They shall cause you to be put to death . . . And not a hair of your head shall perish" (Luke 21<sup>17, 18</sup>). Therefore the very terrors of these evil days are a cause of hope. "When ye see these things coming to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh" (*ib.* v. 31).

But what means this distinction, directed between the sanctuary and the court without the temple, which is given over to the nations,—this abandonment of the holy city to be trodden under foot forty and two months (112)? Whatever the intention, the connexion is obvious between these words and those of Christ in the prophecy so often quoted. St. Luke records the words, "Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled (21<sup>24</sup>). And both passages carry us back to the apocalyptic vision of Daniel as the source of the form of the language used. This ancient seer had spoken of the Antichrist who should speak words against the Most High, and wear out the saints of God; and into whose hand they should be given "until a time and times and a half a time" (Dan. 7<sup>25</sup>, see also 127). The general resemblance of thought is



clear; but there are few passages in Scripture which have caused commentators more perplexity, or called forth more contradictory explanations. We shall find repeated reference to the "times" thus mysteriously indicated, now under one form of description, now under another. "A time, times, and a half a time"; "forty and two months," the equivalent of three years and a half; and yet again, twelve hundred and sixty days, a figure but slightly differing from the twelve hundred and ninety days of Daniel (12<sup>11</sup>). There can scarcely be a doubt but that all these expressions signify the same thing; and it has been generally supposed that the key to their interpretation is to be found in Ezekiel (4<sup>6</sup>), in the words, "forty days, each day for a year, have I appointed it unto thee." The days of the forty and two months have been reckoned as years; and thousands, supposing that there was in the expression a partially concealed revelation of the times and seasons of the Lord's future dealings with mankind, have expended untold ingenuity in endeavouring to discover from what date this prophetic period should be reckoned. Event after event has been named as of sufficient importance to justify its selection as the epoch whose determination would enable men to foretell the end of the age. So many have been the



confident assurances based on this system, so often have they been demonstrated by mere lapse of time to be false, that it is scarcely too much to say that the system itself is now completely discredited. The world is so weary of the failures, that it has little patience left to bring to the investigation of any more hypotheses of the kind.

Are we not, then, wiser in looking for some other clue to the meaning of the perplexing figures? They were surely not spoken by an angel to the seer, and recorded on the sacred page, merely to baffle us,—still less to mislead us. And it seems clear that the year-day theory can never lead us to any conclusion that we can hold with any confidence, after so many laborious attempts have been made in vain. Again, is it not reasonable to ask whether there are not many passages of Scripture which seem wholly inconsistent with such a revelation of times and seasons as this method supposes? The question as to the day of the Lord's coming is one which He Himself not only refused to answer, but mysteriously declared Himself, while in the flesh, unable to answer. Such considerations as these surely point to the desirability of seeking the real clue elsewhere. Now, the use of symbolical numbers in this book, and in fact throughout the Bible, is



very common ; and if any one fact about them is clear, it is the significance attached to the number seven. A consideration of the extremely numerous cases in which this figure occurs, has led to the generally accepted conclusion that this number is designed to be expressive of completeness and perfection. May it not be, then, that the broken seven, the period of three and a half years, whether expressed in years or months or days, may be designed to suggest to us, first, a period indeterminate ? and, secondly, the period of the world's incompleteness and imperfection ? If so, it will seem as if the method of the 1260 year calculation is not only not true, but is the very reverse of the truth ; that the intention was not to induce us to ferret hither and thither in search of a given date, but rather to indicate that the period of the Church's travail and pain was not to be revealed,—was, in fact, of set purpose left indeterminate by revelation, so that we may the more earnestly pray and labour for the shortening of these days. It is not a rigid Fate which rules us, but a GOD who has committed the ministry of His gospel to men,—who has indeed thrown on the faithfulness of men the awful responsibility of shortening or lengthening the evil days. So I venture to interpret the symbol, and this the more con-



fidently inasmuch as not only has the contrasted method hopelessly failed, but much more because this interpretation is pregnant with the most solemn practical instruction. It reminds us that our times are in the hand of God, with whom a thousand years is as one day. It calls us to the most serious and searching reflection on the amazing importance of personal fidelity to Christ; and of the equal importance of unwearied obedience to His command to be instant in season and out of season in preaching the gospel to all nations. It inspires the prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus!" It warns us again, that *in an hour we think not* the Son of Man will come.

The context of this passage in the chapter before us has a similarly practical and serious lesson. The distinction made between the safety of the measured sanctuary and the trampling of the court and surrounding city, can scarcely be misunderstood. The temple, we are taught, is the spiritual body of Christ,—the living Church. Its sanctuary we find to be the object of the Lord's solicitude and tender care; but this guardianship is not extended to the outer court, still less to the city beyond. Are we not to learn that the covenant of the Lord's protection extends to none but the truly spiritual



Israel? To be a real consecrated member of Christ's living body is to be assured of salvation whatsoever woes may fall on the world. But the merely nominal Christian, the formal worshipper, has no share in the promise. "Not everyone that saith, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." No lesson can be more practical or more urgent than this, in every age of the Church. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Immediately following this prophecy of security to the sealed, and peril to all of doubting mind, follows the description of the **two witnesses**, whose preaching is spoken of as extending throughout the whole period of the Church's stress and conflict. This, again, is a passage of which the most conflicting and perplexing expositions have been given. Some have supposed them to be Enoch and Elijah, who, having for a while only escaped death, are in the latest days again to visit the earth, encounter persecution, and at last share the common lot of men. Others have observed that the signs and wonders attributed to them remind us rather of the miracles of Moses, combined with those of Elijah (see v.6), and have either foretold the literal visitation of these ancient seers, or have seen in them types of the Mosaic and prophetic dispensations. Obviously



neither of these suppositions falls in with our suggested interpretation of the 1260 days', nor, indeed, with the 1260 years' hypothesis. If this period covers the whole time of the Church's struggle, the two witnesses must refer to some agency always with us, continually operating throughout all the history of the militant Church. We have some clue to the meaning in the reference which we find in v.4 to the prophecy of Zechariah. The witnesses are described as being **the two olive trees and the two candlesticks which stand before the Lord of the earth.** From Zechariah (ch. 4) we learn the true connexion between the olive trees and the lamps. The flame of the latter is sustained by the golden oil of the former. The figure has been uniformly interpreted as descriptive of those who minister to men in the things of God, of those ambassadors who are appointed at once as channels of Divine grace and shining lights of truth. Why should we, in the present case, seek a closer or more specialised explanation? In our Saviour's prophecy on the Mount of Olives, after speaking of the wars and famines and pestilences and persecutions which should desolate the earth to the very latest days, He declares that amidst all these woes "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations; and



then shall the end come" (Matt. 24<sup>14</sup>). The ideas of preaching and of witnessing are reproduced in the imagery of this vision, and, considering the many analogies already indicated between the two scriptures, we are more than justified in using the former to elucidate the latter. The two witnesses, then, we understand to be a symbolical representation of the specially commissioned ministers of the gospel, sent to testify the truth of God, and proclaim His message at once of warning and of promise to all nations. Their very number serves as a reminiscence of the preaching commission of the Church's earliest days, when Jesus sent forth the seventy "two and two before His face." Then the Master mourned the fewness of the labourers amidst the plenteousness of the harvest, and warned them that they went as lambs in the midst of wolves, and denounced those who should reject them as in peril of a more grievous judgement than that of Sodom or of Tyre. Here the dangers of faithful ministry are yet more forcefully described. Though endued with a power mightier than that of Moses or Elijah (see v.6), compassed about with a protection more assured than that which comforted Elisha, they have learned that they are to be of another spirit than those of ancient days (cf. Luke 9<sup>54</sup>),



and, like their faithful fellows of whom we read in a later chapter (12<sub>11</sub>), "they loved not their life even unto death."

Let none, rejoicing in the security of a Christian land and the easy-going tolerance of a careless age, hastily judge that the terrible description here given of the hostility of the world to the gospel and its witnesses is overdrawn or exaggerated. There is indeed a preaching which flatters and soothes, rather than "torments," the world (v. 10); which condones its selfishness, half excuses its lust, more than half justifies its careless indifference to the holiness of God and the welfare of men. Such preaching even Sodom and Egypt might patronise and accept; but such was not the preaching of Elijah the Tishbite, nor of the second Elijah who heralded the advent of the Christ, nor is such the preaching of the really faithful witnesses who now stand between the living and the dead. These wield a two-edged sword, quick and powerful, the same which at Pentecost pricked thousands to the heart, and constrained them to cry, "What must we do?" and before whose flashing blade Felix trembled. Their message still has torment in it for all who persistently love the world and serve its lord. Now and here they may escape with no harder punishment



than the sneering lip and mocking voice ; but the later centuries, as well as the earlier, can number their martyrs to faithful preaching of the truth ; and days may yet come when, marshalled by the Lord's abiding enemy, all the powers of darkness shall rise in an embittered and cruel spirit surpassing any which the past has recorded, —when this earth shall again deserve comparison with Sodom for its lust, with Egypt for its pride and cruelty, and with apostate Jerusalem, where also our Lord was crucified, for its spirit of murderous resistance to its Saviour. Even then this prophecy will speak in comfort and with promise, as it did in the days of persecution in the past, and as it does amidst the indifference and sloth of these days of transition. “They shall deliver you to death, but not a hair of your head shall perish.” The messengers may fall, but God shall raise them up, and their enemies shall behold them. The shortlived revelry and merriment (v.10) of an impious victory shall give place to fear, when the kingdoms of the world shall have become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ ; and even those who refused to glorify God by accepting His salvation, shall give glory to the God of heaven by the very destruction from His presence which falls upon them in a judgement long delayed. Perhaps, also,



we may read in v. 13 the promise of a revival and a great turning to God amidst the terrors of the eleventh hour of human history. In ch. 9<sup>20</sup> we read of sorrows which fell on the world in vain, for "they who were not killed repented not of the works of their hands." Here we read of a remnant affrighted and giving glory to the God of heaven, even as the seventh angel is preparing to give the final signal before the doomed walls of the spiritual Jericho.

#### V. THE SEVENTH TRUMPET.

(Ch. 11<sup>15-19</sup>.)

In the fifteenth verse of the eleventh chapter we reach the final scene of the parable of history as expounded in the vision of the trumpets. As in the vision of the seals, so here, the scene of the great judgement is not described. Its details form the subject of a later page. Here it is but mentioned in the song of the four-and-twenty elders as an incident of the final triumph; and the point of view is not so much that which regards the condemnation of the wicked, as that which rejoices in the avenging of the elect and the rewarding of those who, through long patience, have waited in faith for the time of the restitution of all things. The two thoughts especially



emphasized in these closing words, are the perfect victory of the Lord's Christ, and the eternal fulfilment of the symbolism of Hebrew worship in the open temple of heaven. The great enemy had boasted for a time that the kingdoms of the world were his, and the glory of them, and that to whomsoever he would he could give it (Luke 4<sup>5,6</sup>). Through the many rolling centuries the vaunting words seem true. He truly wields a mighty power, which works destruction until the final days. The wearied saints must fain share the patience of their Lord, as, in mercy to the heart-hardened, He delays the day of vengeance. Their inspiration is the assurance that the delay is not for ever; and that at last God must and shall be all in all. The chorus will be sung: **The kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever.** Then shall all the heavenly host lift up its voice in endless thanksgiving, and the prophets and all the saints and all that feared the holy Name, small and great, shall enter on their glorious reward.

The language of the closing verse cannot be passed by without notice. Many of the sacred objects of the Jewish sanctuary have already been mentioned in the course of this vision and those which preceded it. In those which follow,



the scenery will be found to be of a less local and national character. It would have been surprising if, after reference to the candlesticks and to the altars of sacrifice and of incense, and to the cherubim of glory, the most sacred object of all had been overlooked. The ark of the Covenant was the symbol of the Divine Presence in the midst of His host. It was the throne of the King in His visible manifestation. Through all the desert wanderings it led the way; and when the last conflict was begun, its presence was a pledge of victory. If we are right in supposing that the conquest of Jericho supplied the outline of the framework of this vision, it will be significant to remember that the ark compassed its doomed walls seven times, and that, when the seventh trumpet sounded, it was carried straight up through the miraculous breach, as the army, conquering by a might not its own, entered into possession of the first stronghold of the Promised Land.

The Jews of the days of St. John revered their temple and all its holy contents; but the shrine of that venerated house had never encircled the ark, had never been overshadowed by the radiant cloud of the Shechinah glory. In this respect the glory of the later house had surely not excelled, or even equalled, that of the former. In a sense



and in a degree all its rites had been maimed and defective, wanting the mercy seat to receive the blood of sacrifice. Readers full of Jewish hopes and fears could not hear without a thrill of joy of the opening of the temple in heaven, with the now unveiled ark of the (God's) Covenant in its midst. It is easy for us to read, with indifference or with careless thought, words which in the first days of this revelation would have embodied the most precious of its comforts. But regarding the Israel of old as typical of the ransomed Church of Christ, we too may find our consolation in this vision of an ark restored. At the close of the vision of the seals, we witnessed, as it were, the antitype of the ancient Feast of Tabernacles, the glorious company of the redeemed surrounding the Lamb in the rapture of an eternal harvest-home. Here, the picture is rather that of the multitude assembled for the solemn worship of the Great Day of Atonement. But now there is no longer a veil, no longer an intervening priest; the whole sanctuary has become embodied, so to speak, in the Holy of Holies, the whole multitude consecrated kings and priests unto God. All are blood-besprinkled, and all stand unfearing, because all-loving, in the open presence of the mercy seat, which is the throne of God. Thus again have we traced the



history of the ages to its glorious close. As the vision fades from the scene, the sound of thunders and voices ring in the prophet's ears. So the curtain falls, while a new series of symbols, still further illustrative of the purposes of God, is prepared.



## CHAPTER V.

### THE THREE ENEMIES.

(Chs. 12-14.)

THE three preceding visions have been characterised by their embodiment of the mystical number—*Seven*. We have read of the seven churches, the seven seals, and the seven trumpets. In a later chapter we shall find what we may call the peroration of the book, introduced by the vision of the seven angels with the seven bowls of wrath, which are the seven latest plagues. Interposed between the prophecies possessing this common characteristic are three chapters which speak of war in heaven and conflict on earth, issuing at the last in the glorious triumph of the Son of Man, the sharing of that triumph by the pure and undefiled, and the judgement and destruction of all who have wrought and fought against the might and love of the Lamb.

In a marked sense the contents of the twelfth,



thirteenth, and fourteenth chapters form a distinct prophecy. Yet their connexion both with what precedes and with what follows is clear. The imagery is new; its interpretation brings out many new teachings; but there are obvious references to what we have already heard, and the contents of the chapters which follow are distinctly foreshadowed. In this case, perhaps even more clearly than in the earlier visions, the scope of the prophecy comprises the entire history of the Church. Here, again, we have a horoscope of its whole course. Already we have learned that the final victory of good over evil will only be reached after ages of desolation and pain,—after many plagues inflicted on the evil, and persecutions suffered by the righteous. Now our thoughts are to be more pointedly directed to the personality of the combatants in this devastating warfare. On the one side is Michael with his angels, on the other stand successively three malignant enemies,—the dragon, the beast rising out of the sea, and the earth-born beast. The twelfth chapter speaks of the first, the thirteenth of the others, who, though distinct, derive their power from the dragon, and share his ruin.



## I. THE DRAGON.

(Ch. 12.)

The opening of the vision discloses to us in brief but deeply significant symbol the beginnings of the Church of Jesus. If some of the language is at first sight "hard to be understood," assistance is soon afforded by the text itself. The prophet beheld **a woman travailing in birth, who brought forth a man-child**; and at once he appends a description which renders the identification certain: **He was to rule all nations with a rod of iron.** The quotation is from the second psalm, of the application of which to the Christ none will doubt. If in this case doubt were possible, it would surely be removed by the observation that in ch. 19<sup>15</sup> the same words are again quoted, and distinctly applied to the conquering Word of God.

If the child be Jesus, how shall we interpret the woman **arrayed with the sun**, who was the mother? Of course the reply of the Roman Catholic theologian will be prompt and confident. He will see in her the Virgin blessed among women, whom he calls "the Mother of God." Those, however, who are more wont to be guided by the very letter and spirit of Holy Writ will hesitate much before attaching to the figure a



significance so intensely contrasted with every other scripture which speaks of the Virgin Mother. And this hesitation will be more than confirmed by the verses which follow, and which speak of the wilderness sojourn and sustenance of the woman, and of the remnant of her seed. Rather do we see in this figure a portrayal of the holy Church of God,—the Church broadly considered, as comprehending, first, that of the older dispensation, and then as representing that of the glory that excelleth. Her crown of twelve stars reminds us of the twelve gates and twelve foundations of the Holy City; as these in their turn remind us of the twelve patriarchs of Israel, and the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Micah had long before prophesied of the travailing of the daughter of Zion, whereby Bethlehem-Ephratah should be glorified, out of which He should come who should be ruler in Israel, “whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 4<sup>10</sup> 5<sup>2, 3</sup>). We may truthfully and reverently speak of Christ as, in a sense, the child of the Jewish Church; and the thought need cause no confusion on account of that later revelation which describes the Christian Church as His spotless Bride.

The vision dwells not on the human life of the Son, but swiftly passes from the thought of the Incarnation to that of the Ascension. The child



**was caught up unto God and to His throne.** But, meanwhile, another and a terrible figure has been brought upon the scene. Mention had already been made of the king of the locusts, which devastated the earth, issuing out of the smoke of the bottomless pit, whose name was Apollyon—the Destroyer. Henceforth we shall again and again hear of this dreadful foe of God and man, this especial antagonist of Christ in heaven and on earth. Of the details of the description,—the blood-red hue, the **seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns**,—it will be necessary to speak hereafter. Now, it may suffice to note them as being symbols of a power that is appallingly great and manifold in its subtle operations. There is no room for doubt as to the identification. The seer is his own interpreter, and tells us that the great dragon was **that old serpent called the devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world.** He is here represented as maliciously awaiting the birth of the child, that he might devour Him. The Gospels tell us how the roaring and devouring lion lay in wait for the Saviour in His wilderness hunger, and how, armed with the bright sword of the Spirit, the strong Son of Man overcame the very same assaults which destroyed our first parents. We are reminded, however, by every page of Scripture, that those forty days of con-



flict represent no single isolated fact, but were but as one strenuous battle in a vast campaign, whose limits and duration no thought can measure. In heaven this mysterious war began, and it will only cease with the end of the age.

From the very beginning of the Church of Christ its life has been a desert pilgrimage in the midst of foes. In the wilderness, the woman's place was prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days, an expression whose interpretation we have already discussed. Now, we are to learn how surely, during the long but undetermined period of her probation, vigorous means are being concerted and carried out for her glorious deliverance.

**There was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon.** Only by two other sacred writers is the name of Michael used. St. Jude speaks of him as the Archangel, or chief of angels, and represents him, as he is represented here, in conflict with the devil (v.9). In the Book of Daniel he appears as Israel's Prince (Dan. 10<sup>13</sup>, 21<sup>12</sup>, 3), intervening for the deliverance of the chosen race in the time of the great tribulation which should precede the days of resurrection and of judgement. The meaning of the name may assist us to its interpretation. It signifies "Who is like unto God?" (cf. Ex. 15<sup>11</sup>, Ps. 71<sup>19</sup>, Jer.



49<sup>19</sup>). Bearing in mind the warlike functions ascribed in this book, especially in its later pages (see 19<sup>11</sup>), to Christ; remembering the typical relation which Israel bore to His Church, and the special antagonism implied by so many passages of Scripture between the Son of God and Satan,—it is not, perhaps, very hazardous to suppose that by Michael we are intended to understand none other than the Redeemer Himself, Prince of angels, as of the kings of the earth, or perhaps a personification of the victorious power of Christ.<sup>1</sup> If so, this text, which speaks of the casting down of Satan from heaven to earth, will recall our Lord's words to the seventy when they returned, rejoicing that the devils were subject unto them: "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Luke 10<sup>18</sup>). We need scarcely enter on the enquiry, perplexing if not hopeless, as to whether the two scriptures, so similar, do or do not refer to the same spiritual fact, or whether even that which is here spoken of as the "war in heaven" be not the heavenly aspect of that struggle in the desert which the Gospels narrate. Perhaps the best answer to such questionings is that the fact

<sup>1</sup> In v. 10 this victory over Satan is significantly associated with the power of Christ. It is interesting, also, to compare the description in Dan. 10<sup>5, 6</sup> with that given of Christ in Rev. 1<sup>13, 15</sup>.



is one in the spiritual order of things ; and there are many texts familiar to us, which, as regards such matters, seem to ignore the sequence of time. " Now is the judgement of this world : now shall the prince of this world be cast out " (John 12<sup>31</sup>) ; " The prince of this world is already judged " (*ib.* 16<sup>11</sup>). It may well be sufficient for us to understand, as it is gloriously assuring for us to know, that though for a while Satan rages wrathfully in our midst, in the spiritual realm he is already vanquished. The woman's Seed has bruised and crushed the serpent's head, and the heavenly host has already heard the beginning of the song of victory : **Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ : for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night** (ch. 12<sup>10</sup>).

This assurance being ours, we can the more cheerfully turn to the record which follows of the pains of the wilderness sojourn,—of that warfare still waging here below, waging the more fiercely because the devil knoweth that he hath but a short time. We are reminded that though now, for a period whose limits we cannot know, the scenery around us is that of the desert, this by no means implies that we are abandoned or forgotten by our Lord. As Moses



said to Israel when beginning their wanderings, speaking in the name of the Lord, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself" (Ex. 19 4); so here the same metaphor reminds us that it is under the guidance and guardianship of our Lord that we endure conflict and toilsome pilgrimage: **To the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, and be nourished there (v.14).** The discipline is needful; is working out a blessing. In the very waste He will speak comfortably to us, and from thence will He lead us to the vineyards of our inheritance, so that the valley of Achor shall be a door of hope (Hos. 2 14, 15). Let us take heed, however, as to the means and conditions of the victory which our Lord would have us share with Him. **They overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death (v.11).** Their strength was the strength which comes of cleansing by atonement, which is exercised in witnessing for Jesus, and which, in the might of love, is faithful unto death. These shall not perish in the wilderness, though they die there. As we read in the end of this prophecy, they shall "enter in through the gates into the city."



Plain and practical, however, as in its broad outline the teaching of this chapter is, there are passages in it which we must speak of tentatively. The "flood" of the 15th verse recalls that in which the 124th psalm speaks of the power and rage of the adversaries of the righteous (Ps. 124:2-6), and which Isaiah reproduces in the words, "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him" (59:19). If any significance underlies it beyond that of general destructive malice, it probably consists in the suggestion of the raising up of armed hosts of foes. Then we should interpret the succeeding verse as representing the relief which has more than once been experienced by the Church owing to quarrels and conflicts between the enemies themselves. When pagan Rome was the most virulent of the enemies of Christ and His cause, the invasion of the barbarians from the North interrupted the course of the persecution, the mutual destruction of the godless providing a time of rest for the godly. More than once in history has the earth, in such sense as this, helped the woman,—has opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. So hath He made the wrath of man to praise Him.



To the end, the anger of the dragon rages, but we have in the 17th verse a deeply interesting suggestion of a change of method in his warfare. Through all the ages he is wroth with the woman. At first his policy was wholesale persecution. His hope was to crush the kingdom of Christ under the weight of Roman tyranny, and century after century witnessed the horrors of fire and sword devastating the vineyard of the Lord. But the cruelty was in vain. The testimony of generations of martyrs only confirmed the power of the truth. The Church grew stronger and stronger, until at last it gathered to itself the imperial power, and directed the government of the world. No longer was persecution possible. The organised Church was beyond the power of such warfare as that; but, as we sadly know, the resources of the tempter were not at all exhausted. His subtlety found occasion for even deadlier mischief in the very change which had passed over the external face of the world. If he could not crush the Church collectively, he would seduce believers severally; so he would continue the war, if not against the woman, then against the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (v.17). We have before us a sad



illustration of the success of this fatal design. We know by experience its present danger. One by one the redeemed of the Lord have been assailed and deceived. The whiteness of the Church's robe has been soiled; its external power has brought about internal corruption and weakness. Happily the faithful witnesses are many, and are increasing still, because "He that is for us is more than all that can be against us"; and He has taught us that if we resist the devil he will flee from us, and has not left us ignorant of his devices. But we have learned enough to fear and dread this oldest and fiercest of foes. When we hear the lion's roar, or the serpent's hiss, we are timely warned to watch and pray.

## II. THE BEAST FROM THE SEA.

(Ch. 13<sup>1-10</sup>.)

The thirteenth chapter presents to us the second and third of the Church's relentless enemies, whose identity is not expressly determined by the writer, as is that of the dragon. The first ten verses describe a beast rising out of the sea, in appearance part leopard, part bear, part lion. The language inevitably recalls the dream of Daniel (ch. 7), wherein he saw, amidst the



striving of the four winds of heaven upon the great sea, four beasts come up from the deep, the first like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and a fourth, dreadful, terrible, and destructive, whose similitude is undetermined. The vision of St. John combines the attributes of the three animal forms described, and adds words expressive of power and authority and blasphemous pretension. Like the dragon, it had seven heads and ten horns, and was crowned. Daniel's prophecy is universally regarded as applicable to four successive mighty empires of the world, all in their turn hostile to the Israel of God, all destined to fall before the kingdom then yet to be revealed of the Son of God. Again, bearing in mind the typical character of the Jewish Church, and the suffering condition of the Church of Christ, to which St. John would administer at once warning and consolation, we interpret the single yet compound creature of the present vision as an embodiment of what was common to all the successive monsters of Daniel,—an embodiment, that is to say, of the world-power viewed in the light of its brutal hostility to the Church. We read that the dragon (that is, the devil) gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority (ch. 132). Even so, Christ Himself described



the fiend as "the prince of this world" (John 12<sub>31</sub> 14<sub>30</sub>). So Satan claimed to be: "All this power will I give Thee, and the glory of them, for that is delivered to me" (Luke 4<sub>6</sub>). I suggest, then, with some confidence, that the beast from the sea, bearing the name of Blasphemy, is a type of the world-power,—the world as St. John viewed it in his epistle when he wrote, "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2<sub>15</sub>); and St. James when he says, "The friendship of the world is enmity with God," (4<sub>4</sub>),—the world-power which in its pomp and pride claims and receives the homage, the worship of the worldly; which thus blasphemes God by appropriating that which is the right of God alone.

This world-power was of course, to the first readers of the vision, almost precisely identical with the Empire of Rome. But believing that this prophecy has an articulate message, and is of practical import for all time, I would not limit its application to that heathen power of the past. In the history of Rome, indeed, we may possibly find the explanation of the severe yet not mortal, wound spoken of in verse 3. The conversion of Constantine may have seemed such a wound; may have appeared to promise an end of the persecution of righteousness by



political force,—to promise even the speedy triumph of the Church. In fact it was, as we now know, the starting-point of an era of corruption and of new peril to all that was holy. But here, again, a wider interpretation may be suggested, which will, as it were, include in a representative manner all specific instances. The resurrection of Christ itself gave to the world-force, wielded for the nonce by Pilate, what to the eye of the faithful, not yet fully instructed, might have been regarded as a deadly wound. It disclosed a hidden power which did, in fact, encourage the hope of a swift victory. It led the apostles to anticipate the speedy restoration of the kingdom to Israel. But the final triumph still tarries. The forty and two months of sovereignty are not even yet fulfilled. The power is still with us, and has its multitudes of worshippers still,—worshippers who, parodying the name of Michael, are not weary of crying, *Who is like unto the beast?* (v.4). Christ called this idol Mammon. His words set forth the solemn truth which this passage contains, wrapt up in its strange symbolism: “Ye cannot serve”—ye cannot worship—“God and Mammon.”

For centuries after St. John wrote, this foe was from time to time at open war with the saints,



and exercised his persecuting cruelty and might amongst all kindreds and tongues and nations. The burden of the prophecy which he uttered for the encouragement of the oppressed, was an echo of that which Isaiah declaimed against the spoilers of God's people in his day: "Woe to thee that spoilest . . . when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled" (Isa. 33 1). **He that leadeth into captivity, shall go into captivity: he that killeth with the sword, must be killed with the sword.** Here is the patience and faith of the saints (Rev. 13 10).

### III. THE BEAST FROM THE EARTH.

(Ch. 13 11-18.)

We now pass to the consideration of the third enemy,—the **beast coming up out of the earth**. If the two which preceded are Satan and the world-power which Satan wields, who is this, their colleague and ally in the war,—this **horned lamb who spake as a dragon**; this wonder-working deceiver, who, by his subtlety, **exerciseth all the power of the first beast**, and gives it an articulate voice, instead of the merely roaring mouth of a lion (v. 15),—this intelligence which systematically, by skilful politic action, prompts to a persecution less openly violent than that of merely brutal power, but not less cruel?



(VV. 16. 17). In later chapters (16<sup>13</sup> 19<sup>20</sup>) this associate of the dragon and of the first beast has another designation,—“the false prophet,” words which suggest the meaning I venture to ascribe to the lamblike beast when I call it “the world-wisdom”; the wisdom which knows not God; the “vain philosophy” of St. Paul; the knowledge which puffeth up, whether in the form of the antinomian Nicolaitan *γνώσις* or gnosticism of the early days, or the humanitarian ethical *ἀγνώσις* or agnosticism of these last times. If this be so, there is much in these verses which is of serious import for us. If, on the contrary, the “deceiver,” the “false prophet,” is simply some heretical leader of the past, an Arius, or a Mohammed, then the book becomes all but useless to every age save one. I do not believe it was designed to bear any such limited or temporary application. Especially, I do not believe it was given us to tempt or encourage us to judge our fellow-men, even though they may seem to us arch-foes of truth, worthy of signal and prophetic denunciation. God is the judge of Nero, of Genseric, of Mohammed, and of Napoléon, whose names have been frequently resorted to as typified by one or another of these symbolic beings. Inasmuch as they, or any other evil-doers or evil teachers, have marred or



hindered the work of God, they fall within the type; but in as far as *we* are marring, or injuring, or buffeting the face of Christ or of His Bride, or are causing any of His little ones to offend, so do we. Let us seek an interpretation which brings home every warning to ourselves; let us be doubtful, be wary, before we accept one which invites us to roll on to the shoulders of others all these denunciations of sin; which would thrust back their application into the distant past, or postpone it to an unknown future.

In this light, let us look again at this third enemy of God. Note the description: **he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon.** The lamb is throughout this book, and indeed all Scripture, the symbol of the Christ. There is no reason for deeming this verse to form an exception. This enemy is then spoken of as putting on a gentle, even a Christlike appearance, while his voice is the voice of the fiend himself. Does it not remind us of other scriptures which present warnings as to the course of the Church's conflict? Christ Himself told of coming evil days (Matt. 24<sup>23-24</sup>), when **false Christs and false prophets** (note the conjunction) should arise, who, like this beast, should show great signs and wonders, "insomuch that, if it were possible, they should deceive the very



elect"; of a time when "many shall come in My name, saying, I am Christ, and shall deceive many" (v.5). St. Paul also (2 Thess. 2), in his prophecy of the Antichrist, speaks of the enemy as sitting "in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God," while his working is "the working of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders." The reference in all cases seems to be the same; seems to point to that false yet plausible vaunting "wisdom" of which St. James also speaks with his usual vigour; the wisdom (forsooth) which "descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish" (3 15).

Ever since the firm establishment of Christianity as a system, it is a historic fact that the wisdom of the world has, over and over again, represented itself as expounding the method of Christ more perfectly than do the Sacred Scriptures or the ministry of the Church which bears His name. In ancient days the most mischievous and perilous of falsehoods were proclaimed by many successive heresiarchs as being more perfect expositions of Divine truth. They have striven to conjure with the name of Christ, as Simon the sorcerer wished to do; to exorcise devils, as the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19 14) essayed to do with such untoward consequences to themselves. In recent days, in our



very midst, we may witness similar pretensions ; we find the philosophy of the world sneering at the theology of St. Paul, while it patronises, and claims to explain and apply more simply and truly, the philanthropy of Christ. The most dangerous of all heresies are those which give expression to half truths : by such the Church has been always, and still is, surrounded and threatened. Here we are warned to be on our guard against every such assault on the fulness of our faith ; against those who, with the external appearance of a lamb,—or, as the gospel has it, “ in sheep’s clothing,”—are in truth ravening wolves.

Again, the description ascribes to the beast mighty powers ; he is able to work signs which would at once strike Jewish readers as signs of a true prophet. The mission of Elijah was more than once attested and approved by the exercise of power to call down fire from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. The mention of this power recalls the expressed desire of two of the apostles in like manner to vindicate the claims of Christ, and His sad, emphatic rebuke of the vengeful spirit which prompted the request (Luke 9<sup>54</sup>). In passing, we perhaps may learn this : that signs which, in the older dispensation, testified to the mission of a true prophet of God, are by no means to be trusted as bearing a like



testimony in gospel days. For the Israel of old, victory and earthly prosperity were the reward of goodness ; plague, famine, persecution, captivity, the sword, were the chastisements of sin. In the New Testament we read of a reversal of this method of Providence. Persecution is the subject of a beatitude. The *saints* are to be delivered up to prisons,—and this shall turn to them for a testimony (Luke 21<sup>13</sup>). They shall be hated of all men for His name's sake, and be put to death (v.16. 17) ; yet all the while are not under the wrath of God, but the objects of His guardian care. So here, in this chapter, we have read (v.10) of a destiny of captivity and death working out to perfection the **patience and faith of the saints.**

Now, does not the world-wisdom, as we hear its dragon's voice to-day, resent this apocalypse of a Church suffering with its Lord, declaim against patience, and prophesy smooth things if only its counsels are obeyed ? Here, again, there is a half truth. In every exhortation to brotherly kindness among men, in every labour of ministry to sorrow, in every effort for the amelioration of the common lot, we discern true signs of a holy mission. But when we find the same voice explaining away the Divine work in creation and in providence, when we see the



same hand drawing a veil across heaven and hell, that all the thoughts of man may be concentrated on the *here* and the *now*, we are warned to distrust the prophet, however gentle and plausible and lamblike be his mien. The everlasting gospel of Christ is the gospel of the kingdom of *heaven*, not of earth; a gospel which, with all its gracious promise for the life which now is, is emphatically a revelation of the spiritual and the eternal. That teaching cannot be a blessing to pilgrims which casts doubt as to the goal of the pilgrimage, which suggests building instead of camping in the wilderness. The voice is the voice of the dragon who said of old, "Ye shall not surely die," and with the words robbed earth of its Eden. Verily Paradise will not be restored under the auspices of this liar, whatever specious wonders he may work. When such as he shall cry, "Lo, here is Christ!" go not forth.

Further, we read here of the false teacher as wielding, by subtlety, the world-power, and with refined methods, not brutality, persecuting the saints whose names are in the Lamb's book of life. He causeth all to receive his mark who will learn of him; and, to use a word of very recent and painful history, would "boycott" all that refuse him. The contrast between this



method and that of the blaspheming wilder beast which came before, is noteworthy. The world-power in its brutal days, before it passed into the hands of the seeming prophet, was put forth in war, in captivity and the sword. Now the opposition is represented as of another nature. And is not the prophecy being fulfilled? The persecution of to-day lies in the supercilious smile, the contemptuous curl of the lip, the pitying look of disdain. Is it not true still that the world loves its own? It may be, indeed, that this allusion to buying and selling (v.17) has reference to dishonest tricks of manufacture and trade, lying adulteration, deceiving advertisement, and all the many like phenomena of fraud which are daily making harder and harder the lot of the scrupulous and honest man. The lord of the world admires and commends the unjust steward whose schemes of false book-keeping and forged accounts find imitators enough to spread misery to-day.

We have assumed throughout that the true method of interpreting this book is not to regard it as a consecutive unfolding of human history. Not even so would I read this single vision of the three enemies. It is true that the order of their mention is not likely to be merely accidental; that we are probably right in supposing that the



Church in its earliest age was in a special sense face to face with the devil as Christ's personal foe; that in the succeeding age its conflict was with brutal worldly power (this, indeed, is a clear historic fact); and that in these latter days the most dangerous enemy is the worldly wisdom. But the dragon is represented as present in influence through all the vision; so also is the beast of brutality and blasphemy. The period, therefore, of his authority is in effect the time of the Church's storm and stress. Its travail and labour and warfare against its foes extend through all the mystic period of the forty-two months. In relative influence the reigns of the three enemies may be successive, but they have ever been, and still are, united against us. St. Paul also speaks of three hostile and terrible powers, to be resisted and overcome with the armour of God. The Baptismal Service sums up his teaching, and that of St. John, in the renunciation of evil which it requires; and if—as we well may—we regard the flesh as the equivalent to the carnal wisdom here symbolised, we shall find the enemies there named in the same order, and shall with all earnestness recall and repeat the prayer that every child of God “may have power and strength to have victory, and to triumph against the devil, the world, and the flesh.”



There remains a strange verse to be considered, difficult, indeed, of interpretation, but whose difficulty is no sufficient excuse for passing it by when we set ourselves the task of searching this scripture for edification. In closing his portrayal of the era of conflict, St. John uses these emphatic words: **Here is wisdom. Let him that understandeth count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred and three score and six (v. 18),**—words which have been the despair of so many patient students that we can only speak of them with doubt and hesitation: yet the apostle has so earnestly commended them to our thought, that we will not despair of divining their secret, and gathering from them some truth. I will venture to proceed on lines similar to those already adopted. We find in many passages of this book the number 12 associated with the thought of the glorified Church. In the fourth chapter the four and twenty elders represent humanity, and sing the song of humanity before the throne. In the seventh, 144,000 is the mystic number of the sealed. Again, immediately after the mention of the 666, the 144,000 are described as if by way of contrast. Later on, we read of the twelve foundations and twelve radiant gates of the city of God. May it



not then be that, as 12 is the symbol of the redeemed, so the broken number, 6, may be in some sense the symbol of the rejected among men,—rejected because they are the rejectors of the salvation proclaimed to them? The beast, we believe, is the type of the world-wisdom. Let us omit one letter of the verse, the indefinite article before “man,” which is not in the Greek, and read it thus: “Let him count the number of the beast, for it is the number of *man*; and his number is 666.” Then the thought will at once be raised of the perilous, sinful nature within us, against which we must war; which we must bring to the blood of Christ for cleansing, and to the Spirit for regeneration, before we can hope to be of the number of the 144,000 whose robes are white. The triple 6, it is perhaps not altogether fanciful to say, may at least remind us of the fallen trinity within, and of the apostle’s prayer: “The God of Peace Himself sanctify you wholly, and may your *spirit* and *soul* and *body* be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5<sup>23</sup>). Thousands of pages have been devoted to the attempted identification of some monster among men, by adding up to the Greek equivalents of the letters of their names. To what profit even, if true? But, as we know, such



speculations have been, and are, absolutely and hopelessly futile. Our alternative suggestion may be wrong, but it at least is articulate for *us*: it breathes a lesson full of weight for every age, and never more so than now and here. It has, I submit, support from that later passage which speaks of the saved as having gotten the victory, not only over the beast and over his image and over his mark, but also **over the number of his name** (15<sub>2</sub>),—a victory thus indicated to be won not only over the foes without, but also over the deceitfulness of the heart within. And “they overcame by the blood of the Lamb.”

#### IV. THE HARVEST OF THE EARTH.

(Ch. 14.)

The seer has still something further to tell us of the Church's warfare, before this vision gives place to another of like prophetic import. But before passing to its great catastrophe, he interposes a scene which wonderfully contrasts with those we have been considering. He has been speaking of the turbulence of earth, restless like a troubled sea under the raging of its bitter foes, and has disclosed that mysterious number, symbolical, as we think, of man's native corruption and need of



a new and spiritual birth. Now he lifts his eyes to the heavenly scene. He had partially described it before in the vision of the sealed roll; but he delights to recall the comfort of it, that the troubled hearts of his readers may, like his, be refreshed. The redeeming Christ stands on the strong hill of Zion, receiving the adoration of the **one hundred and forty and four thousand**, clean from every mark of the beast, but having **His Father's name written in their foreheads**.

At first sight there seems some reason to suppose that this glorious company represents not all, but a chosen band of the holiest of the saved; but probably the better view is that the intention is to comprise in that great number, symbol at once of magnitude and of perfection, the whole of the triumphant Church which had then passed to its rewards, **first-fruits unto God and the Lamb**. Their song was new in heaven. From the ages of the ages there had been angelic music there, unceasing since the morning stars sang together creation's earliest hymn. We know not what wonders other created worlds may be contributing to that holy concert. But the glory of all lands shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord. They shall not sorrow any more at all; and here we learn that the redeemed



from the earth come up with a song that is all their own. No one of the hierarchy above could sing that strain save those purchased with the blood of the Lamb. The description is exhilarating, but contains words which call for very solemn thought. When we read the characteristics of these harping worshippers, we are reminded of many warnings from the lips of Christ which are not often dwelt on in that fashionable gospel which is always welcome to the world. Later in this book we shall find a yet more emphatic reiteration of the same lesson,—the lesson that heaven is only for the pure, the obedient, the true, the faultless. There shall enter therein “nothing that defileth, neither worketh abomination or maketh a lie” (ch. 21<sup>27</sup>). There must be striving to “enter in at that strait gate.” “Not every one that saith Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven”; “Many are called, but few chosen.” How ready we are to encourage a broad charity, a generous but indiscriminating hope, which takes little account of such sayings as these !

From contemplation of the heavenly peace our attention is once more called down to earth. The end is drawing near ; but as the Lord had prophesied that before the end the gospel must be preached for a witness to all nations, so here



the prophet hears the voice of an angel flying in the midst of heaven, and calling on every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people to Fear God and give glory to Him (vv. 6. 7), because the hour of His judgement is come. It need cause us no perplexity, that in the vision the proclamation of the everlasting gospel is represented as uttered by the voice of an angel. We may regard the heavenly messenger as, for the time and for the purpose of the immediate revelation, representative of a ministry which we know to be in fact committed to men. As in the eighth chapter we saw an angel offering up, with heavenly incense, the prayers of the saints, but discerned in that figure no warrant for the doctrine of angelic intercession, so here we would draw no inference as to the employment in the latter days of any other evangelizing instrumentality than that of men ordained to preach to fellow-men. The details of every vision must be interpreted by Scripture as a whole, and it suffices to find in this verse a reminder of the loving purpose of the Almighty to send the message of His mercy to every land. To pray in the words, "Thy kingdom come," is to pledge ourselves to large-hearted missionary exertion; for the angel of judgement is restrained until the gospel-promise is fulfilled.



The language which follows, descriptive of the woes of the latest days, anticipates a figure which is to be much more fully developed in the vision which follows, and the significance of which will be more conveniently considered at that point. The words which the seer heard from the lips of the second angel, **Babylon is fallen**, must have recalled to him those in which Isaiah and Jeremiah comforted the Church in their days, by setting forth the descent of God's wrath upon their persecutor Babylon. But the reference is swiftly passed by. At once a third angel followed, whose denunciation resumes the terms of the previous chapters, foretelling the eternal destruction of all the servants and worshippers of the beast, in anticipation of the final judgement, with the depiction of which the vision concludes. In many passages of this book terrible language is used to arouse the Church to a sense of the dreadful reality of the wrath of God, though its descent be long delayed. It is natural to shrink from such words; it is easy to yield to the temptation which moves us to attempt to explain them away. But here they stand in all their awful solemnity, here they are reiterated again and again, and at the very last are indorsed by the emphatic declaration, "If any man shall take away from the words of



the book of this prophecy, God shall take his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city." We may well reflect in all seriousness whether the revulsion from the doctrine of Divine vengeance, which is so very manifest in this generation, be not a result of the insidious teaching of the false prophet, and of him who was a liar from the beginning. It is a daring thing for us to draw inferences as to what is and what is not consistent with the character of the Most High, selecting as our data not the whole of His self-revelation as contained in the Scriptures, but only such parts thereof as commend themselves to our biassed judgement or treacherous prepossessions. Christ spoke of the Father as "able to destroy body and soul in hell,"—"able," notwithstanding His infinite love, His long-suffering, His delighting in mercy. Here we are told that the torment of the condemned will be endured in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb; words which, however mysterious, seem clearly to imply an approval of the dreadful sentence. Surely it is our wisdom to take earnest heed of these things, even if it be with daily fear and trembling that we work out our salvation.

After such thoughts as these, the voices from heaven which followed were doubtless as full of



precious music to St. John as they are to us, and have been to tens of thousands who have listened to them at the grave-side of the departed : **Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth : Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours ; and their works do follow them.** The passage may be understood in two ways, according as to whether we read the words "from henceforth" as qualifying "blessed" or "die." In the former case, the sense seems to be that the full fruition of the joy of the saved will not be entered upon until the end of the age shall have come,—until the resurrection is past, and the kingdom delivered up by the conquering Christ into His Father's hand, and God is all in all (1 Cor. 15 24). This is so consonant with many other scriptures, that we are inclined so to interpret the promise. Otherwise the teaching may be, that in those last evil days, days which shall be shortened for the elect's sake (Matt. 24 22), death will be coveted by the righteous as a greater boon than life, even life hid with Christ in God. In any case, the response of the Spirit comes as a glorious assurance to all. All through the ages of conflict there are toils to be endured which weary the faithful. From all these pains there shall be rest. Of the wicked we have just now read, **they have no rest**



day nor night; of the saved, we are told elsewhere, "they serve Him day and night in His temple" (ch. 7<sup>15</sup>). Their labour ceases not; rather their "works do follow them,"—having lived in the Lord, having been faithful in the least things, they die in the Lord, and a nobler stewardship, a more glorious sphere of service, is theirs for ever, but "toils" are no more. "There the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest."

Already, as we have seen, the consequences of the final judgement have been in a measure anticipated. An angel has announced the doom of the rebellious, another voice from heaven has declared the blessing of the saved. But before the vision gives place to that which follows, the scene of the judgement itself is symbolically portrayed. It is a sign that we are nearing the end of these prophecies. Already we have twice reviewed the course of history up to its closing scene. In the visions of the seals and of the trumpets, judgement has been implied, but not described. Hereafter we shall, as it were, be summoned to the great assize itself in all its solemn pomp (ch. 20<sup>11 ff.</sup>). Here the same event is depicted in terms less definite, but almost equally impressive. The time of the harvest and of the vintage of the earth has come. Both



figures have become familiar to us through the older scriptures. The **Son of Man** is manifested coming in a **cloud**, as Daniel beheld Him in vision (7<sup>13</sup>), and as the angels at the Ascension foretold (Acts 1<sup>11</sup>). An angel voice from the temple of heaven gives the word for the thrusting in of the sickle, almost in the language of Joel (3<sup>13</sup>). **The harvest of the earth is ripe**; the wheat and the tares, so long growing together, shall be mingled no longer (Matt. 13<sup>39</sup>). Taking the passage as a whole, we can scarcely doubt as to its teaching, though a minute examination may disclose some details which may cause perplexity. It appears perhaps incongruous with the general spirit of the book, that the reaping, elsewhere ascribed to the angels, should here be attributed to **Him that sat on the cloud**, and still more so that an angel should seem to speak to Him in terms of command, even though it be as a messenger from the Father. Probably it is vain for us to attempt to harmonize all the complex elements of such pictorial and symbolical scenes. Possibly such strained analysis was never intended. But, contrasting the harvest with the vintage, we may perhaps discern, even amidst some elements which embarrass us, a gracious hint as to the tenderness of our Lord. In the parable of the Tares, no doubt, the harvest of the



earth comprises both the evil and the good. Here, on the contrary, the vintage is obviously designed to indicate the gathering together of the condemned: "The vine, reaped with the sharp sickle of the angel which had power over fire, is cast into the great wine-press of the wrath of God" (v. 19). The harvest, on the contrary, only includes the fruit of the good seed, reaped to be gathered into the garner of the Lord. If this be so, there is a blessed significance in the fact that the Saviour Himself comes down to reap the ripe corn which is His own, while the work of destruction is committed to an angel, as a minister of wrath. Even so, there is a correspondence with the parable which the passage inevitably recalls, where it is said, "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13<sup>41-43</sup>).

The wine-press was trodden without the city, which is the Church of God. The last woe, the Divine vengeance, falls not on it at all. Rather is it briefly pictured here, as more fully at a later page, as a conquering army mounted on horses,



and triumphantly attending its leader and King, riding even in the midst of the blood of the slain. Need we seek for a more specific interpretation of the **space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs** than that which sees in the phrase a portrayal of the terrible and world-wide comprehensiveness of the judgement? Some have supposed a reference to the size or limits of the Holy Land, but to what purpose it is not easy to see. The earth, on the contrary, is in this book often spoken of with reference to its fourfold dimensions. We read of its four corners, its four winds; its life we have supposed to be symbolised by the four living creatures. If four multiplied into itself and then a hundredfold be regarded as representing the area of a judgement covering the whole world, in contrast with those partial judgements already past which smote only a third part of the earth or sea or sky, such a use of figures may be compared with the use of 144,000 as a symbol of the Church above. But the solving of such riddles is by no means essential to the great and solemn teaching which has been the subject of our thoughts. The day of our life is a day of battle and of peril, as every verse of this prophecy shows us,—a day of confused noise and garments rolled in blood,—but it is a day also of salvation, of mighty deliverance.



Here is the patience of the saints : here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus (v.12). “ Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life ” (ch. 2<sup>10</sup>).



## CHAPTER VI.

### THE SEVEN VIALS.

(Chs. 15. 16.)

**I**N the fifteenth chapter we are introduced to a new vision, or series of prophetic scenes. There is a new beginning, but, as we at once perceive, not a beginning at the same point as before. The three preceding prophecies we have regarded as embracing in their purview the whole course of the Church's pilgrimage. They have presented to us cycles of plagues or manifestations of God's wrath in His controversy with the nations. Here again we read of seven plagues, but they all relate to the latter days. They are the seven last plagues, in which is filled up the wrath of God. Each succeeding vision has brought "the end of the days" more distinctly into view. The one we are now to consider is wholly concerned with them. There is an indication of this in the very introduction



now before us. In the vision of the seals, and in that of the trumpets, there was, as we have seen, an interlude or pause between the sixth and the seventh scene; in which the attention of the seer was called for a while from the conflicts on earth, that he might be assured of the eternal safety of the sealed, in the one case, and of those within the measured sanctuary, in the other (chs. 7 and 9). Here the corresponding assurance serves as an exordium to the revelation which is to follow. The vision of the seven vials, then, we regard as an amplification of that which has already been partially disclosed as the course of events in the latest days. To St. John and the Church of his time all the visions were mainly prophetic, or rather predictive. Now, much of those which we have considered has been fulfilled, some are being fulfilled, and we are taking our part, for good or ill, in the conflicts of which they speak. What we have yet to learn we believe to be mainly, if not wholly, concerning what is future even for us.

The first scene described can scarcely be misunderstood. We behold a multitude rejoicing as for recent victory, standing on the margin of a sea, and singing **the song of Moses and of the Lamb**. Our thoughts, scarcely less certainly than those of the Jewish saints in the days of the revelation,



are at once transported to the time of Israel's miraculous deliverance from the pursuing hosts of Pharaoh. The fifteenth chapter of Exodus records the triumph, and gives the words of that exultant hymn of Moses,—words immortal in themselves, and wedded to immortal music by the genius of Handel. These warriors whom now we see and hear harping with the harps of God are likewise conquerors. They have gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over the number of his name. Their patience has vanquished the world-power, their faith has overthrown the world's specious wisdom, the blood of the Lamb has redeemed them from the primal curse of a fallen nature. Their song is something more, therefore, than the song of Moses. It is the song of the Lamb. They

“Ascribe their conquest to the Lamb;  
Their triumph to His death.”

The words of their anthem are quoted from, or embody, many scriptures of the ancient Church,—from Deuteronomy (32<sup>4</sup>), from the Psalms (111<sup>2</sup> 139<sup>14</sup> 145<sup>17</sup>), from Hosea (14<sup>9</sup>), and from the exulting strain which concludes the prophecy of Isaiah (66<sup>23</sup>). Themselves already victors, they anticipate the swiftly coming day when the whole earth shall fear and glorify the



name of the Lord God Almighty, the King of nations.

But we are presently taught that the overthrow of Egypt, of which we are reminded, was not a final destruction, such as that which is now preparing. The seer beholds the sanctuary of the tabernacle of the testimony opened in heaven; that tabernacle whose mercy seat had once been the throne of Israel's King in the midst of His warring pilgrims on earth, and before which the prayers of the people were wont to be offered up. Thence there issued seven angels robed in priestly vestments. To them one of the cherubic figures delivered seven golden bowls,—bowls such as were, like the censer of the eighth chapter, wont to be used for the offering of incense, but were now full of the wrath of God, “ready to be revealed in the last time.” The prayers of the saints are heard, and the long-withheld might of God moves to avenge them and vindicate His holy will. As in many manifestations of His presence in the older Church, so again the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God (cf. Ex. 40<sup>34</sup>, 1 Kings 8<sup>10</sup>, Isa. 64), and none was able to enter the temple till the day of vengeance was past.

A great voice—the voice, as we believe, of God—gives the final signal for the battle. We may



observe in the signs which follow, and in those which characterise the whole vision, reminiscences of wonders already described. There is something like a summing up, a massing together of the previous imagery, but always with some addition which intensifies its force. Thus we have mention of the sea of glass of the fourth chapter, but **mingled with fire**, the emblem of judgement and anger. The references to the plagues of Egypt are renewed and continued from the eighth chapter ; but now they afflict not a third part only of earth or sea or sky, but all the realm of worldly power. The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet of the twelfth and thirteenth chapters, and Babylon from the fourteenth, again appear. Such a reproduction of various figures already separately presented not only marks the unity of the book, but serves to bring it, so to speak, to a dramatic climax. It is scarcely needful to dwell in detail on the language, whose general significance is clear, even though the particular application of each simile be impossible. The day of which it speaks is that of the final fulfilment of that great prophecy of Christ which unlocks so many of the mysteries which might otherwise have caused us to despair, the day of "signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars ; and upon the earth distress of



nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring" (Luke 21<sup>25</sup>); the day of "great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world" (Matt. 24<sup>21</sup>). Evil men and seducers shall have waxed worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived (2 Tim. 3<sup>13</sup>); and, as we read before, these woes shall move the foes of Christ to aggravated blasphemies, not to repentance (ch. 9<sup>20</sup>).

On the pouring out of the sixth bowl, as at the sounding of the sixth trumpet, mention is made of the Euphrates. Then we read of the loosing of the four angels, "which were prepared there for the hour, and the day, and the month, and the year" (9<sup>15</sup>). Here we are told that **the water of the great river was dried up that the way of the kings of the East might be prepared**; and we recall the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah concerning a drought on these same waters (Isa. 44<sup>27</sup>, Jer. 50<sup>38</sup>). There, however, the drying up was part of the judgement on Babylon, and was fulfilled in the capture of the city by Cyrus, as described by Herodotus. Here the thought rather is that of a facility given for a while to the enemies of God, as they take counsel and gather themselves together against the Lord. The region of the east was the region of fear to Israel, and perhaps the symbol has no



further lesson for us than that which tells us of the approach of a conflict between righteousness and iniquity, closer, more urgent and terrible and crucial, than any the world has yet seen. Possibly the east may be the source from which this peril will approach. There are elements of power and danger there, at the thought of the possibilities of which politicians may well, nay, do, speak with doubtful, if not with fearful, minds; but our principal care is not as to the mode of the peril or the direction of its approach. The certainty, the seriousness of the struggle, are far more weighty matters for concern.

Probably, moreover, we shall be right in supposing that this battle which is preparing is to be of a moral and spiritual, rather than of a physical or political nature. The leaders of the hostile force are described as **unclean spirits like frogs proceeding out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet.** The frog was regarded as typical of pollution, and as such, doubtless, its similitude is referred to.

The gathering together of the armies is completed at the place known in the Hebrew tongue as Har-magedon, or "the hill of Megiddo." The name was one of painful memories and fatal associations in the history of the Jews. In the



plain of Esdraelon, near this hill of Megiddo, the best of the kings of Judah was defeated and slain by Pharaoh-Necho, king of Egypt. The story is very briefly told (2 Kings 23<sup>29</sup>), but the impression made on the national mind was clearly out of proportion to the fewness of the words which record the terrible disaster. More than a century later, Zechariah referred to that day of darkness and shame as having become proverbial as time of mourning (Zech. 12<sup>11</sup>). And well it may have been, for it was the beginning of that fall whose end was the overthrow of Jerusalem and the captivity of the people. Insomuch as the name was one of evil omen for Israel, it would be the more attractive to their enemies. We can scarcely hope now to learn more of its significance, than that it serves to warn us of a struggle which will be terrible in its intensity and conclusive in its result. There is the more reason to take earnest heed of it, because of the urgency of the words which remind us of its sudden development at the last. The fifteenth verse, which is interjected into this prophecy of the assembling of the hosts, is a reminiscence of the gospel. It was spoken to the seer, perhaps, by those same lips which, when speaking on Olivet of the same catastrophe, had said: "Watch, therefore, for ye



know not at what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of Man cometh" (Matt. 24<sup>42ff.</sup>); words which sank into the mind of St. Peter (2. 310), and were echoed by St. Paul (1 Thess. 52). We have heard of the statesman high in office, with means of judging of the matter as complete as was humanly possible, who, on the very eve of the last great war which devastated western Europe, declared there was not a cloud on the sky of international politics. Even so in its suddenness shall be the bursting forth of that final conflict. To behold no sign of its coming, to be able to discern no lowering in the heavens, to have a stronger sense than the world ever had before of the uniformity of Nature, and the continuance of all things as they have been since the fathers fell asleep,—these things, instead of wooing us to a vain security, should stir us to the keener vigilance. **Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth** (that is, keepeth on, retaineth) **his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.** The days of spiritual peril may at any moment be upon us, though



we may be unable to conceive of the how or the whence ; our only security is to have the loins girded about, the lights burning.

And now we see, as it were, the battle in array. The three seducing spirits have led the kings of the earth to set themselves and take counsel together against the Lord (v.14). They are assembled for the pouring out of the seventh bowl, the long accumulating terrors of the cup of His indignation. At last the time has come when "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision" (Ps. 24). In this chapter the seer does not enlarge upon the final overthrow ; that is reserved for further development in the vision which follows. That which now we are reading concludes in terms which remind us of the falling of the curtain on the revelation of the seven trumpets. As viewed in heaven, the uttering of the *fiat* of the Most High is the end of the matter. At the word, **It is done**, the earthquake and the storm swiftly make an end of the Babylon which had defied His omnipotence, and oppressed His children. We are shortly to hear much more of the city's pride and cruelty and uncleanness and greed, of the history of her growth and the catastrophe of her fall. Now, the suggestion is that of a sudden destruction. We can conclude



nothing from this as to the duration of the days of the final tribulation. The times are in the hand of God. But it may well be our prayer, that He will make no long tarrying. For the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. In the shadow of His wings let us make our refuge "until these calamities be overpast" (Ps. 571). With it comes, as here we learn and shall see again, the end of the age: **Every island fled away, the mountains were not found** (v.20). We seem to hear with trembling the blasphemies of the foe as they are swept away in judgement (v.21). The morrow of that day shall dawn on a new heaven and a new earth.



## CHAPTER VII.

### THE FALL OF BABYLON.

(Chs. 17-19.)

#### I.

**T**WICE already the name of Babylon has appeared in connexion with the conflicts and sorrows of the last days, and twice, also, our thoughts have been called in the same direction by the mention of the great river Euphrates. In the fourteenth and sixteenth chapters the destruction of the great city has been referred to; but in considering those passages we refrained from entering into a detailed examination of the symbol, in view of fuller opportunity which is afforded by the vision now disclosed. In the seventeenth chapter, and yet more minutely in the eighteenth, the theme is fully expanded. They thus have the appearance of being supplementary to the revelations already set forth. They take up the subject announced but not developed, and



pursue it to its terribly tragical consummation. That scene of ruin and desolation which has been twice presented, and witnessed, so to speak, from a distance, is now displayed in the near presence of the seer.

He is carried away in the spirit into the wilderness, and beholds there the revolting spectacle of a gaudily bedecked and drunken harlot seated on the beast of Blasphemy. The mention of the beast recalls at once the great red dragon of the twelfth chapter, there named "the devil and Satan"; of which we read in the thirteenth chapter, that he gave the beast from the sea "his power and seat and great authority." But the names of Blasphemy and the ten crowns which are presently mentioned, appear to indicate the beast from the sea itself, rather than the dragon which gave it its power. Probably the two figures are here combined, as being one in power and malice against the Lord.

The woman bears on her forehead the legend: **MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.** What is the significance of the figure and the name? We read in the vision of the three enemies, of a woman led away into the wilderness to be nourished there, and saw in it a picture of the Church of Christ, persecuted yet sustained



during the times of its probation. Can the two be the same? Are we driven to the painful conclusion that the drunken harlot is the symbol of an apostate Church,—a Church corrupted and defiled by its association with the power of this world, and in its turn become a persecuting force, stained with the blood of martyrs? We recall the language in which Isaiah denounces Israel's unfaithfulness as spiritual adultery: "How is the faithful city become an harlot! it was full of judgement, righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers" (Is. 121). And we must admit that such passages give much support to this interpretation. But, at the same time, we remember that the metaphor of fornication was not confined by the Hebrew prophets to the case of apostasy from truth. It was applied by Isaiah to Tyre (Isa. 23 17), and by Nahum to Nineveh (34). Moreover, in seeking an interpretation of this prophecy, we must not forget the circumstances of the age in which, and of the people to whom, St. John wrote. There is no hint, in the vision of the twelfth and thirteenth chapters, of the apostasy of the Church; and if the divinely sustained "woman" of that prophecy is to be identified with the loathsome harlot of this, our instincts seem to require very cogent proofs. St. John's readers knew only too well of a licentious and



cruel city seated on seven hills, well worthy of being compared, for its vices and resistance to pure religion, to Babylon, or Nineveh, or Tyre, or any luxurious capital of the past. We can scarcely imagine them, amidst their then environment, casting their thoughts so far forward as to contemplate, first, the Roman Empire become Christian, and then the Christian empire back-slidden to an apostate state deserving such a symbol as this. It is true that we have been wont to see in many prophecies elements which admit of a double fulfilment, and such may be the case here; but the primary application is first to be determined; and the great probability seems to be that the seer had before him a portrayal of the pagan imperial city, the seat of that world-empire which for the time was wielding all the evil forces of the world; and verily the dragon has had few fouler disciples than the emperors who, in the lifetime of St. John, disgraced the imperial purple. We take it, then, that the mention of Babylon, coupled as the name is with Old Testament language applied to other hostile and wicked cities, is designed to enlarge or amplify the thought embodied in the figure of the compound beast which we saw rising from the sea in the thirteenth chapter. The foe is still the world-power in all its vileness and cruelty. But



the imagery is now not only more developed, but is immediately to be more particularly identified with the city which was in that age the centre of hostility to the suffering Church. And this view we shall find to be confirmed by the interpretation at once to proceed from the lips of the expounding angel.

He declares to the wondering prophet the mystery, or mysterious secret, of the hateful figures. The beast is the same as that which, in the thirteenth chapter, was represented as reviving after being, as it were, "wounded unto death." Here also its power is spoken of as apparently destroyed, yet recovering again, inspired with the energy of the bottomless abyss. **The woman** (see v.18) is the **great city**, seated on the beast, **which reigneth over the kings of the earth**. Further, the seven heads are **seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth**; the city is a city of seven hills. The thoughts of the readers must again and again have been directed to Rome. These words are all but tantamount to giving the name itself. But the seven heads have, as we find, a further significance. **There are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come**. Here again is a passage which has called forth much ingenious speculation from commentators, who have sought a personal interpretation ;



and various sequences of Roman emperors, before and after Nero, have been thought by one or another to satisfy the description.

But, looking at that which follows (v.12), we are compelled to collate the whole passage with the apocalyptic vision of Daniel, the terms of which are so closely followed. He beheld a symbolical representation of four kings, and the last of these had, like the beast here described, **ten horns, which were ten kings** (Dan. 7<sup>24</sup>, Rev. 17<sup>12</sup>). We always regard the "kings" of Daniel's prophecy as representing kingdoms, rather than monarchs capable of personal identification. Noting the close resemblance of the two scriptures, are we not compelled similarly to interpret the language of St. John? There is, it is true, a significant difference between the records, which needs explanation. Daniel's prophecy relates to four empires, succeeded by a fifth, which appears as divided into ten. That of St. John mentions six as preceding the tenfold division. The discrepancy is scarcely difficult to reconcile. Daniel's revelation extended no further backwards than his own day. By common consent, the first of the beasts which he described was Babylon, the second Persia, the third Greece, the fourth Rome. From many passages in this book we find that St. John took a wider view of the history of the



conflict between the people of God and their enemies. The chosen race had been the victims of two mighty powers before Babylon arose to wield for a time the might of the world. Before Babylon, was Assyria, and, yet earlier still, Egypt. Adding these to the kingdoms of which Daniel wrote, we shall find that the first of Daniel's thrones corresponds with the third of St. John's, and the fourth with the sixth. This exactly meets the description of v. 10. In those days the five great monarchies of the pre-Christian era had passed away, the sixth was in the zenith of its power and magnificence. There was one yet to come, which Daniel and St. John agreed in describing as diverse from the rest, in that it comprised not one but many kingdoms.

Now, in our days the sixth kingdom of the prophecy has, in its turn, passed away. We are living in the era of the divided tenfold kingdom, and may look on the world around us for the interpretation of the prophetic words. A glance at a map of Europe or of the world suggests the exposition which we seek. From the first development of organised political power in the world down to the dismemberment of the Roman Empire, the authority over the civilised regions of the earth was, speaking broadly, wielded successively by the five great empires we have



named. Some were of great, some of less, duration ; but the policy of each was to subjugate to itself all races which its resources enabled it to reach. Rome was the greatest of the five, inasmuch as it not only conquered the older powers of the East, but overthrew its rival, Carthage, and extended its explorations far into regions of the west and north, unknown in the more ancient days. It was the strongest of the five, well according with Daniel's description,—a “fourth beast . . . exceeding dreadful, whose teeth were of iron, and his nails of brass ; which devoured, brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with his feet” (719). It probably sustained the fulness of its power for a longer time than any of its predecessors.

But since the fall of Rome, and the division of its unwieldy territory, there has appeared no successor of like nature. No conqueror has succeeded as Alexander and Cæsar succeeded. There have been rulers daring enough in ambition to dream, perhaps, of universal sovereignty, and once or twice it has for a while seemed possible that one throne might dominate all other thrones of the earth. But the authority of a Mohammed, of a Charlemagne, of a Genghis Khan, of a Napoléon, has quickly melted away. There has been no other world-empire. The sceptre of the



earth has never again been wielded by a single hand, and we believe never will be. The seventh kingdom of St. John's vision, the fifth of Daniel, is what we now see, a divided sovereignty. We would not press for a literal interpretation of the number "ten." In reading the language of symbolism, we may well be satisfied to regard it as simply expressive of lasting division. It is the policy of God that this shall be so, and that no other kingdom shall prevail over all the nations save the kingdom which God shall set up; no other throne shall be universal save that which His Son shall establish in the spiritual Zion. Have not, then, the words of the prophets been fulfilled? Let it not surprise us if St. John speaks of this seventh and divided government as continuing but **a short space**, or declares that the **ten kings receive power as kings one hour with the beast** (vv. 10, 12). In his day the times which he foretold were still centuries in the future. His hearers were deeply concerned with the fate of the sixth kingdom. The seventh was beyond their horizon. Even to the interpreting angel the view of the coming age may, so to speak, have seemed foreshortened in the dim distance; and we at least are incapable of regarding the duration of time as it must be regarded in the spiritual region, and by beings who have entered



on eternal life. Still less can we essay to measure it as does He who sees the end from the beginning, with whom one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Neither is it cause for wonder that the ten kings are spoken of as giving, no less than the six which went before, **their power and strength unto the beast**. The beginnings of the victory of the divided kingdom displayed a power as cruel and as terrible as that which they destroyed and replaced. The foes which desolated Rome were heathen and barbarous hosts. Such at first were the ten horns which hated the harlot, and made **her desolate and naked . . .** and burned **her utterly with fire** (v. 16). It is true that now many of the kingdoms of the earth are nominally Christian; but it is also true that, in a very serious sense, there is a *world-power* among us still, as opposed to all that is spiritually pure and holy as was ever heathen monarch. Even among the rulers of the great empires of the past there were some of gentle character, who for a time were friendly rather than hostile to the people of God. But as one benevolent Pharaoh among many, a relenting Artaxerxes, an amiable Trajan, did not suffice to falsify a symbolism which only too faithfully portrayed the general characteristics of the



heathen empires, so a nominal profession of Christianity which scarcely restrains, has often not even tempered, the ambitious schemes and ruthless procedure of monarchs in modern times, may not suffice to remove them beyond the ambit of the prophetic words. We have in the histories of those who have been styled "most Christian kings," or "eldest sons of the Church," or even "Holy Fathers in God," records as shameful as those which branded with infamy the names of Nebuchadnezzar and Nero.

And we have not yet seen the end of the age. The voices of not one but of many prophecies from the lips of Christ, and from the pens of St. Paul and St. Peter, as well as the visions of this book, lead us to expect that in the latest days there will be a fearful recrudescence of every form of evil thought and deed, a manifestation of satanic power and malice surpassing in danger and atrocity any that have gone before, attendant on the revealing of the Man of Sin, the Antichrist more terrible than all previous Antichrists, "whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of His coming" (2 Thess. 2 s). We may well tremble as we read, and consider whether, even now, the voice from heaven is not speaking to us in solemn words of warning against love and admiration for the spirit of this world: **Come out**



of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues (Rev. 18 4).<sup>1</sup>

## II.

The seventeenth chapter has announced the destruction of the great world-city and its power. The eighteenth gives at length a description of the tragedy of the accomplishment. Its language embodies that of many of the ancient seers who wrote for the consolation of Israel; and surely nothing could be more persuasive or more assuring to the believers of the age of St. John than such a revival of the memories of past deliverance. A comparison of this chapter with Isa. 47, Jer. 50. 51, Ezek. 27, and Nah. 3, will at once show how carefully and how diligently the writer has gathered together many scriptures which tell of the completeness of the ruin which awaits those who are found fighting against God. It will be seen that denunciations originally pronounced against Egypt and Nineveh

<sup>1</sup> "It is extraordinary that St. Hippolytus, writing early in the third century, inferred, apparently not from Rev. 17<sup>12</sup>, but from Dan. 2<sup>42</sup>, that the ten powers of the last days will pass from monarchies into democracies. Few things were, humanly speaking, less likely in his days, few more so in ours" (Simcox, *sub loco*). Indeed, such a transformation is in visible process before us,



and Tyre are added to those which foretold the fate of Babylon. But the aptness of the choice of Babylon as the principal type of the doomed city must have been apparent in the days of the revelation. It is far more apparent now. Even then the contrast between the past magnificence and the present decay of the ancient Oriental capital was great—was a pledge that the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah would be completely fulfilled. Now, we see the fulfilment complete. Egypt has for many centuries been effete and powerless in the counsels of the world, but has still a national existence and a name. Persia is an empire still. The Macedonian pre-eminence was shortlived, but Greece retains a place among kingdoms. Babylon, on the contrary, once a proverb in the earth for wealth and splendour, has been absolutely blotted out—has literally become the habitation of wild beasts and of every doleful creature. The besom of destruction has spared nothing but the buried ruins, which remain to confirm the word of God, and point the lessons of His threatening and promise.

We have seen that the burden of the prophecy applied primarily to pagan Rome, that great city which St. John and his readers saw, without the semblance of a rival in the world for power and pomp. It sufficed for him and



them to be assured that that enemy would fall before a conquering Christ. But the prophecies of God are very deep and manifold. They are declarations of principles as well as, or even more than, predictions of facts; and as we read them we can scarcely forbear from asking whether we ought to regard the terrible language of the eighteenth chapter as wholly satisfied and exhausted by the devastation which broke up and destroyed the Roman Empire. Is there not room for the serious supposition that, as the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, though originally directed against the Babylon of the East, were revived and made applicable to the Babylon of the West, so they may still be regarded as living words, pregnant with instruction and warning? So I venture solemnly to read the prophecy. True, it had a terrible fulfilment when Goths and Huns and Vandals swept in successive streams over the fair provinces of the South, despising the beauty of their palaces, burning their cities, destroying their commerce, making desolate those highways of the sea once crowded with a traffic which spoke of unmeasured wealth and luxury. That ruin was doubtless very great, and in a sense it was a type of the utter ruin which must overtake all the enemies of God. But can it be said that God has "made a full end" of the



woman which sat on the beast, as He has of her namesake and predecessor? Has the Church of Christ been avenged on her foes, as the people of Israel has been avenged? Surely not. The judgement has fallen upon the sixth of the kingdoms of this world, but the seventh, the divided kingdom of the ten horns, continues still. It served as the instrument of God's vengeance on its predecessor, but is still the embodiment of the power of the beast which makes war upon the saints.

In so far, then, as the mystic Babylon represented the world-empire of ancient Rome, the prophecy is fulfilled. But in so far as that city served as a type of any and every power which is hostile to God and His Church, the final judgement still tarries: **the great millstone** has not yet been **cast into the sea** (v.21). We have already learned that we are not to expect to see again the power of the beast centred in any one city or nation or ruler. The era of world-empires is past. The Babylon which is with us now is represented by that enormous aggregate of irreligion and vice to which every city and every land terribly contributes. There are sentences of description in this chapter which have the appearance of exaggeration when applied to even so great a city as was the Rome of Nero.



Some of them have often been regarded as much more closely descriptive of some vast modern centre of commercial wealth and luxury. It may well be so. The eye of prophecy may have reached beyond the days of Rome's destruction to another age, when the world's wealth should have become inconceivably greater than anyone could have dreamed of when Elagabalus dissolved pearls to fill his goblet, or Vitellius spent 10,000 sester tia on a feast; when a luxury surpassing that of Rome should be displayed not here and there in a few favoured centres only, but in scores and hundreds of splendid and profligate cities; when the Church of God should be imperilled, if not by persecution, yet by perils far more dangerous to its spirituality and purity and power.

We clearly are taught by the nineteenth chapter that the fall of Babylon was not the end of the battles of the Lord. Once more, and but once more, we hear of hosts in martial array. Not one king but many are in the field, with their armies, gathered together to make war against **Him that sat upon the horse, and against His army** (ch. 19<sup>19</sup>). The scene is possibly the same as that before symbolised by the mustering at Har-magedon; the conflict which it describes is probably to be understood as a moral and



spiritual, not a physical warfare,—such a fight as is even now being waged, and seems destined to increase in its intensity from age to age. Is there not a hint of this in the description given of the Conqueror? He goes forth from an open heaven, clothed with a vesture dipped in blood (19<sup>13</sup>). Attending Him are armies arrayed in fine linen, white and clean (v.14). There is no word which speaks of spear or shield; only out of His mouth goeth a sharp sword (v.15), that with it He should smite the nations; and His name is called The Word of God (v.13). The host is one which goes forth to war in the habiliments of the Prince of Peace, and their march is a march of victory. The beast was taken captive, and with him the false prophet which had deceived the worshippers of the beast. The imagery is indeed partially that of battle. There is slaughter in that dreadful time, fearfully described as the great supper of God (v.17, R.V.); but there are among these metaphors others which suggest such a conflict as we see now raging in the minds and consciences of men between the Word of truth and the deceitfulness of sin. That Word is indeed a sword. Those who will not receive it must be slain by it. Now it speaks of a Lamb whose sacrificial blood can wash the foulest garments, so that the



worst may be delivered from the mark of the beast, and join the white-robed army of the Victor. But it tells also of a lake of burning fire, yawning to receive those that harden their hearts. There the three enemies, the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, and, as we read with trembling, their victims too—all the abominable, all whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life—shall be tormented day and night unto the ages of the ages (20<sup>10</sup>, 15 21<sup>8</sup>).

In following thus the course of the warfare of the last days, we have passed over a description of a heavenly scene which is interposed in this vision, as similar scenes are in those which precede it, and which now is described in terms which anticipate and prepare the mind for the glorious climax of the prophecy.

After the dirge pronounced over the fallen city by the mighty angel who lightened the earth with his glory, the prophet heard again the anthem upraised by the voices of the glorified. As in the book of "The Praises of Israel" the Hallelujahs multiply at the close, so we find them here. We have read before of heavenly songs, but have not met with this word of triumph and joy. Now it is reiterated by the great multitude, by the four and twenty elders, and by the living creatures. In part it is inspired by the



aspect of judgement on the persecutor of their brethren, because now the day has come for which the souls beneath the altar groaned. But the greater inspiration of their joy is found in the words: **the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready** (197). This figure, so wonderful in its expression of the perfect and eternal union which shall exist between Christ and His Church, had long before been used. St. John had heard it from the lips of his Lord in the parable of the Virgins. St. Paul had developed it when he wrote to the Corinthians, "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 112), words which he himself felt to contain "a great mystery" (Eph. 5<sup>25, 32</sup>). But it was a different thing having the thought presented in a parable, and standing, as it were, in the very presence of the fulfilment,—beholding the bride **arrayed in fine linen, clean and white**, and hearing the blessed words of invitation to the marriage feast.

The vision which we have been considering is distinguished from all the others by the prominence which it gives to the intervention of the revealing angels. An angel had carried away the seer into the wilderness, where he beheld the mystic harlot ready for destruction, and had



declared the meaning of the symbol. Another angel had sung the pæan of victory ; and now the same voice bids him recognise the truth and faithfulness of God in this glorious summons to the marriage. We cannot wonder that the ravished prophet was bewildered at such a climax, following the marvels which had already filled him with astonishment and joy, or that in his rapture he should offer to a being so glorious in power and wisdom that adoration which belongs to God alone (19<sup>10</sup>). The radiant spirit calls him back to himself, claims brotherhood with the yet incarnate saint, and bids him lift up his heart and worship God, who has united angels and men in a fellowship of service for the testimony of Jesus, which is the spirit of prophecy.

We shall find the symbol of the marriage resumed and developed in a later, even in the last scene of all, when the noise of the tumults of history is left behind, and the dawn of the eternal day of peace has come. But before the full revelation of these things, one more vision intervenes. We have again and again been brought up to the point of the great day of judgement, of which the Christ of the Gospels so often spoke, and have now even passed beyond it, and witnessed the execution of its sentence in the



blessing of the saved and the destruction of the rebellious; but we have had no description of the assize itself. In the chapter which follows, one more glance at history will briefly prepare the way for the setting of the **great white throne**, for the last scene of the drama of earthly life, and the beginnings of that of the world to come.



## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE GREAT ASSIZE.

(Ch. 20.)

WE have already encountered many passages in this book on which it has been impossible to speak without great diffidence; but perhaps there is none which presents so much difficulty as the earlier part of the twentieth chapter. In approaching it we feel even more intensely than before the need for patience and humility. And surely our safest, nay, our only possible course, is to apply the method of interpreting scripture by scripture, letting the word of God be its own expositor, if so be that in these things "hard to be understood" we may find the light of heaven bringing to us both comfort and instruction.

A careful examination points to the conclusion that we here enter on a new revelation, as distinct from that which precedes it as are any two



of the visions already considered. It is obvious that its principal theme is that of judgement, the last great arraignment of the human race before the throne of God; a scene which has already been many times implied, but not yet described. And now the prophet does not at once disclose the solemn tribunal, but leads up to it by reference, in a symbolism presenting many contrasts with that hitherto reviewed, to the antecedent events. If this be so, it will follow that the period covered by the language of the first ten verses must coincide, at least in part, with those already delineated. And this conviction we shall find to be confirmed by certain resemblances between this prophecy and those which have come before.

For instance, we read in the vision of the seven vials, of the sending forth of deceiving spirits (16<sub>13, 14</sub>); and here **Satan** is spoken of again as going out **to deceive the nations** (v. 8). Moreover, the result of the deception is in each case the same: it brings about the gathering together of the powers of the world, to give battle to the army of the living God (16<sub>14, 16 20</sub>). In both cases there is reference to the typical character of ancient Israel, and the coming up against them of hosts from afar. Before, we read of the drying up of Euphrates to prepare the way of



the march of the kings to Har-magedon. Here, the prophecy of Ezekiel (chs. 38. 39) against Gog and Magog is embodied and applied; a prophecy of which history discloses no certain fulfilment in the past, and which possibly has no other application than that which St. John here supplies. In both cases the result of the conflict is the same. Har-magedon was the scene of the destruction of the hosts of the enemy by lightning and earthquake; here we are told that **Gog and Magog compassed the camp of the saints about, and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them.** Lastly, the ultimate issue is described in almost the identical words of the nineteenth chapter: **the devil is cast, like the beast and the false prophet, into the lake of fire and brimstone.**

Such are the correspondences between this vision of the final struggle and those which have already been considered. The crucial question is, Whether it is possible to maintain the identity of the two events, in face of the startling contrasts which distinguish the early verses of this chapter from those which, in the previous prophecies, described the course of events in the world and Church? Here, at the outset, we are told that **the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil and Satan,** the first of the three enemies



described in the twelfth and thirteenth chapters, was seized and bound and imprisoned in the abyss, that he should deceive the nations no more, until a thousand years should be fulfilled. The definite length of the period mentioned need scarcely cause us serious perplexity. We meet nowhere else in Scripture with this precise figure as a subject of prophecy, and we feel at liberty to interpret it as generally as we have done other round numbers in these prophecies. It may as easily be regarded as representing a long time, precisely known to none but God, as the 144,000 may be regarded as symbolical of the great multitude of saints which no man can number. But is it possible for us to regard this binding of Satan as taking effect collaterally and synchronously with the period which we are elsewhere told is characterised by his activity as the leader and inspirer of the enemies of the Church? At first sight the contradiction seems impossible; but it behoves us to be distrustful of first impressions, and to take account of various passages of the inspired word before we venture to come to a conclusion on the one side or the other. If it so be that we are brought face to face with what seems to be a paradox, we may remember that it is not the only instance of the kind which Scripture supplies in its treatment



of the subject of the devil's influence on earth. For example, St. Peter tells us in his first epistle, that our adversary "as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5 8); while in his second epistle we read that "God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgement" (2 Pet. 2 4). St. James implies his nearness to us when he says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jas. 4 7); while St. Jude declares that the fallen angels are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, unto the judgement of the great day" (Jude 6). Or take another class of texts from the lips of our Lord Himself. "Now is the judgement of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12 31). The Holy Spirit, "when He is come, will convict the world . . . of judgement, because the prince of this world hath been judged" (*ib.* 16 8, 11, R.V.). Here the thought is, that the work of redemption has the effect of a final judgement on all evil and the Evil One. Then again, in the twelfth chapter, at the opening of that prophecy which tells us so much of the power and malice of our foes, we are taught that the ascension of Christ was followed by an instant casting out of Satan, and there was present rejoicing in heaven over the



downfall of the Accuser of the brethren. And though it is true that we there are told of his inspiration of the beast and false prophet, the suggestion seems to be that during the period of the Church's stress they are the immediate instruments of the resistance and persecution; and we have been led to the opinion that, while Satan was the especial foe of Christ when in the flesh, it is with these ministers of his, rather than with himself, that we have now to do. Taking all these declarations together, it is surely not an impossible exegesis (to say the least) to suppose that, while in a sense we must reckon Satan among our present foes, yet, in a sense equally true, his power is now so restrained and limited by the victory of Christ, that he may be spoken of as suffering captivity under chains in the abyss which is his prison. If so, then the teaching of this mysterious chapter will be that as yet the warfare of God's people, though severe, has not assumed its intensest form; that for the greater part of the Church's history its struggle is against a foe wounded and shorn of his power, but that at the last, for a short time, there must be a period of terrible conflict, a time in which the servants of Christ will find themselves face to face with the malignant prince of evil, even as Christ Himself was. So read, this



scripture falls into harmony with many others which have been already quoted. It explains the terrors of Har-magedon, and of the uprising of Gog and Magog; it reveals the secret of the last days of "tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time," days so dreadful that, "except they should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved" (Matt. 24<sup>21, 22</sup>). If this be not the true reading of the riddle, then we must regard this prophecy as unique,—as standing alone in its depiction of a long era characterised by earthly rest and a complete reign of righteousness, which shall give place in some far distant age to a revival of wickedness in a more aggravated form than any age has yet witnessed. Of the two difficulties, I venture to esteem the former the less.

But before pronouncing on it fully, yet another perplexing passage has to be considered. The seer speaks not only of the binding of the devil, but also of the reign of risen saints during the period of the thousand years. Is it necessary for us so to interpret this saying as to suppose that there will be a divided resurrection,—that a chosen number amongst the righteous dead will be called from their graves to reign with Christ throughout an age of glory, while the rest of the dead, good as well as evil, await the expiration of



this millennium? Again we may say that, if so, this prophecy stands alone. It is true that we elsewhere read that "the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thess. 4<sup>16</sup>), but nowhere else is there anything to suggest a long interval between the resurrection unto life and the resurrection unto shame and everlasting contempt, still less between the resurrection of the martyrs and that of the rest of the dead in Christ. Notwithstanding the singularity of the passage, we must doubtless accept this interpretation if the words clearly require it; but the very singularity is sufficient to put us to enquiry, and to invite very serious reflection before coming to a decision. Again let us carefully note the precise terms of the prophecy, and seek light on it from other scriptures which appear to be relevant.

We observe, first, that St. John speaks emphatically of the *souls* of the martyrs as thus sharing the life and reign of Christ. The expression is the same as that used in the vision of the seals, in which we read of the souls of the slain under the altar uttering the cry, "How long, O Lord?" There we were told that white robes were given unto every one of them. Now they appear in these priestly vestments, and we read: **Blessed and holy is he that hath part in**



the first resurrection : on such the second death hath no power ; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years (v. 6). May it not be, then, that when the seer here speaks of a first resurrection his language is figurative, and refers not to the revivifying of the body, but to the raising of the soul from the death of sin to life in Christ ? If so, the thought recalls many sayings of St. Paul : “ Buried with Him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with Him through the faith in the working of God ” (Col. 2<sub>12</sub>, R.V.) ; “ If, then, ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God ” (*ib.* 3<sub>1</sub>, R.V.) ; “ God, who is rich in mercy . . . even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ . . . and hath raised us up together, and made us to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus ” (Eph. 2<sub>4-6</sub>) ; “ Therefore are we buried with Him by baptism into death ; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life ” (Rom. 6<sub>4</sub>, and see the following verses). In the light of such passages as these, it can scarcely be said to be a straining of language to interpret the resurrection here referred to in a spiritual sense, and to regard



the whole passage as disclosing the glorious truth that even now, if we are Christ's, we are kings and priests, sharing His government and His throne, in anticipation, so to speak, of the more perfect fulfilment of His wonderful promises (Rev. 3<sup>21</sup>).

But there is yet another alternative interpretation, which seems easier of acceptance than that of a widely divided resurrection. We are taught to regard the souls of the righteous dead as in the hand of God, enjoying even now a more perfect life than that they knew when burdened with "a body of humiliation." For them death itself was in a sense a resurrection, a putting on of newness of life, a being "absent from the body" to be "present with the Lord"; a change which might well justify such a figure as we find here; for surely "on such the second death hath no power" (v. 6).

It is submitted, then, that neither the description of an imprisoned Satan, nor the mention of a first resurrection, nor the combination of the two figures, requires us to regard the early verses of the twentieth chapter as wholly relating to events unrealised and future. The symbolism, indeed, is characterised by a confidence and joyousness which contrast it with that previously used to describe this era of struggle and transition.



But we remember that the revelation is now near its close. The apostle has been passing through a course of wonderful teaching in the heavenly places. A heart despondent at the beginning, could scarcely be so after so many splendid assurances of the triumph of Christ and of His Church. Now he seems to be looking back on history from the realm of eternal life, rather than forward to it as one in the midst of the battle, and still doubtful as to its issue. Now, therefore, he is prepared to share the assurance of the angels, and to look down, as they do, on the world, which, in spite of the boasts of Satan, they know to be already overcome by Christ (John 16<sup>33</sup>), and the inheritance of the saints. The change in the point of view may account for the altered character of the description, so that we may learn from it new truths concerning that which now is, rather than receive thereby a mysterious and solitary prediction of the course of events in the indefinite future. But be the attempted solution right or wrong, we are led at last to the scene of the judgement of the great day, which is "the end of all things" pertaining to this age and this world as we know it. Often did Christ, in the days of His human ministry, expound in solemn words this same mysterious subject. It is the theme of many parables; for



instance, those of the Tares (Matt. 13<sup>24</sup>), of the Drag-net (*ib.* v. 47), of the Marriage (*ib.* 22<sup>1</sup>), of the Virgins (*ib.* 25<sup>1</sup>), and of the Talents (*ib.* v. 14),—all recorded by St. Matthew. In the same gospel we have also a description, clothed in metaphor, indeed, but something more than a parable (25<sup>31</sup> *ad fin.*). The apocalyptic passage which we are considering embodies much of the language of the Hebrew apocalypse of Daniel (cf. 7<sup>9, 10</sup> 12<sup>1</sup>), and recalls also St. Peter's prophecy of the last days (2 Pet. 3<sup>7, 10, 11</sup>). It scarcely falls within the scheme of this work to enter on a complete exposition of so great a subject, surely the most serious which can occupy the thoughts of men. It is, however, impossible to pass it by without indicating what seem to be the three leading thoughts which characterise all these revelations of the judgement.

The first is, that the issue of the trial of every soul of man depends on the deeds done in the body. The scriptures both of the Old Testament and of the New speak with one voice on this matter. We will presently consider how far this doctrine of judgement according to conduct is to be qualified by other revealed truths. First let us take note of the emphasis with which the moral aspect of the judgement is reiterated. "God shall bring every work into judgement,



with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Eccles. 12 *fin.*); "Thou treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgement of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. 2<sup>5, 6</sup>); "The Son of man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then He shall reward every man according to his works" (Matt. 16<sup>27</sup>); "All must appear before the judgement seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5<sup>10</sup>); "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6<sup>7</sup>); "I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (Jer. 17<sup>10</sup>). These are but a few passages representative of many. Above them all ring the words of the Master's own declaration, wherein He speaks of the severance of all nations before His throne, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats, when, after enumerating the deeds of mercy done by the righteous, left undone by the wicked, He delivers sentence in the words: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have



done it unto Me"; "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me" (Matt. 25<sup>40, 45</sup>). The thought needed emphasising in the days of the Nicolaitans, and it is equally needful still. It is a glorious truth indeed, that the gospel brings a revelation of forgiveness; without it there could be no gospel for a fallen race; and this book tells us how sinners may be saved, even "by the blood of the Lamb." But the burden of its closing message is that heaven and salvation are for "him that overcometh"; "that there shall enter therein nothing that defileth"; no single germ from which a root of bitterness might grow again.

Moreover, we have here words which speak of a condition of salvation other than, and beyond, that of moral purity. Men shall be judged according to their works, but only those escape the second death whose names are written in the book of life. Our only warrant for secure rejoicing is the assurance that our "names are written in heaven," even though we have power over the evil spirits. The thought of this heavenly register runs all through the inspired writings. We hear of it from the lips of Moses (Ex. 32<sup>32</sup>), from the pen of the Psalmist (139<sup>16</sup>), in the writings of the prophets (Dan. 12<sup>1</sup>), in the teaching of Christ (Luke 10<sup>20</sup>), and in the



epistles of St. Paul (Phil. 4<sub>3</sub>), as well as more than once or twice in this prophecy (3<sub>5</sub> 17<sub>8</sub>). In the thirteenth chapter it is called (13<sub>8</sub>), "the book of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." To have our names thus united to the name of the atoning Saviour implies something more than a record of stainless character, even if that be possible. It needs a new birth, the becoming new creatures in Christ Jesus, a baptism into His Spirit, an acceptance of fellowship with Him in heart and life. Whosoever shall confess Him before men, "him shall the Son of man confess before the angels of God" (Luke 12<sub>8</sub>). Even such are they who are joined to the "assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven" (Heb. 12<sub>23</sub>).

The second of the cardinal thoughts of Scripture concerning judgement is that it is a time of complete and final severance between that which is good and that which is evil. "Come, ye blessed"; "Depart, ye cursed":—where is there any hint that these sentences shall ever be reversed? There are no prophets of the future but the prophets of God, and it is practically only those of the New Testament who enlighten us concerning the life to come. This book of the gospel is, by the admission of all, the most hopeful, the most optimistic in the world. And



it is the most loving. It is true, an ancient prophet tells us that the Father hath "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek. 33<sub>11</sub>). But Christ goes infinitely beyond this. He tells us that, so far from having pleasure in death, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3<sub>16</sub>). Surely in such a revelation as this no truth is omitted which could possibly gladden the heart of man. Yet continually, side by side with words which labour to express the glories of heaven, we find mention of an awful possibility of punishment and destruction. Neither in precept nor in parable does Christ throw a ray of hope over the fate of those unto whom He shall have once said, "I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7<sub>23</sub>). St. Peter has no other word to utter. When speaking of the coming of Christ to judge the quick and dead, his sense of the heinousness of sin is so great, that he seems rather to be overcome with wonder at the possibility of any being saved, than at the remediless judgement which falls on the rebellious, and he asks the terrible question, "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (1 Pet. 4<sub>18</sub>). The heavens give back



no answer save such as we have here: **Whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.** St. Paul, again, affirmed the "justice" of the condemnation of evil-doers (Rom. 38, 2 Thess. 212), and felt the dreadful responsibility of a preaching which, with all the plenitude of mercy which it offered, was to them that perish "a savour of death unto death" (2 Cor. 216). The consistent strain of all his teaching is that the end of the enemies of the cross of Christ is destruction (Phil. 319). The summing up of the Revelation of St. John lies in those words which speak of the finality and unchangeableness of human character at the last: "**He which is filthy, let him be filthy still**"; "**He that is righteous, let him be righteous still**" (2211). We have in another book the great enquiry put, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. 23). We shall seek everywhere in vain for a reply. For the persistent in sin we can only see a "certain fearful looking for of judgement and fiery indignation" (Heb. 1027). Of what that punishment consists, how the many stripes are inflicted, how they are borne,—on these things we will not venture to add unto the things written in this book. Still less will we venture to take away from the words of this prophecy. Let it



be granted that all that we read of it in parable or apocalyptic vision is figurative; certain it is that it is figurative of inexpressible woe. The devils know more than we of what is meant by the wrath of God, and they tremble.

Lastly, a third thought common to every record which we have of judgement, is that of its universality. All nations shall stand before the throne (Matt. 25<sup>32</sup>); "We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ" (Rom. 14<sup>10</sup>, 2 Cor. 5<sup>10</sup>); **The small and the great**, all that have passed into death and Hades, hidden in the earth and sea,—all shall obey the summons; and He shall "execute judgement on all" (Jude 15). There have been partial judgements before on men and nations, when the Lord hath not made a full end (Jer. 4<sup>27</sup>). But these are the last words of human history. Those which follow speak of a new heaven and a new earth. This is the time "to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins . . . and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy" (Dan. 9<sup>24</sup>). No mountain or hill can hide one single soul from the face of Him that sits upon the throne (Rev. 6<sup>16</sup>); nor shall there be any suspension of the sentence. Every man shall receive according to his works. Every evil spirit of darkness shall hear his eternal doom.



The most awful truth of all is this, that the same prison-house which shall receive the devil and his angels shall receive also men whom he has led captive at his will. Of the city of God we shall presently read that its gates shall not be shut at all by day, and there shall be no night there. Of the outer darkness may we not, on the authority of the word of God, solemnly reverse the language, and say, Its gates shall not be open at all by night, and there shall be no day there?



## CHAPTER IX.

### THE HOLY CITY.

(Chs. 21-225.)

AS we open the book of this prophecy at the twenty-first chapter, we experience a sense of rest and comfort; we feel like sailors who, after a long and storm-tossed voyage, have at last come within sight and shelter of land, and are swiftly nearing the haven where they would be. From the conclusion of the third chapter to this point the scenes have been those of disturbance and change, only broken by occasional glimpses of the stability and peace of heaven. It has been necessary every moment to watch closely the compass and chart of our course, and often there have been times of doubt and hesitation. Now we rejoice to be able to lift up our eyes to the green hills, and we revel in the beauty of the scene as we draw nearer and nearer to our home. There is a new heaven above us, a new



earth around, and there is no more sea. The ancients knew not, as we do, that the sea is a purifying and health-giving agent. They regarded it as an emblem of insecurity and severance and unrest. In this sense it is doubtless referred to here. "Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5 17).

In this series of visions, which may be aptly compared to cartoons symbolic of history, we have often noticed suggestions of the contrasts between the cities of the world and the Holy City. Babylon and Sodom, Egypt and Jerusalem, have all been used as types of combinations and conspiracies of men to do evil. Considered collectively, they closely represent the thought which is expressed by "The City of Destruction" of Bunyan's great allegory. Now destruction has fallen upon them. They are to be heard of no more. The new world is prepared for a new and holy fellowship of men. The Holy City is seen coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. This is the beginning of a new æon of existence. The remainder of the book consists of a glowing description of the manner and the environment of life in that age to come, under new heavens and in a new earth, "wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. 3 13).

Much of its language is gathered from the



prophecies of Isaiah (see chs. 25<sup>8</sup> 35<sup>10</sup> 54<sup>5</sup> 65<sup>17, 19</sup> 66<sup>22</sup>, etc.). Were it incumbent upon us, for the fulfilment of our purpose, to undertake its exposition in order and in detail, we should encounter many difficulties; but they are difficulties mainly of a mechanical and comparatively unimportant character. The general and practical interpretation, the broad outlines of the teaching, are clear and simple. The lessons to be gathered from it are solemn and profound, but withal full of comfort, nay, of exhilaration, for all who will come within the conditions of the promises.

It was a happy instinct which prompted the choice of this chapter, to be read side by side with the first of Genesis, as one of the proper lessons for Septuagesima Sunday. The first creation "was very good," but, in the mystery of Divine providence, it was destined to corruption, fall, and ruin. The problems of its immense and terrible history are before and around us. The course of its destiny to its very close has formed the subject of our investigation, as we have read these prophecies. Now we hear the words, **Behold, I make all things new**; and in brief but splendid sentences the character of the new age is portrayed. Lest there should be any fear of wreck befalling this second earth, like that which ruins the first through the workings of sin from



seed sown by the devil, the assurance is quickly given us : **There shall enter therein nothing that defileth.** That creation shall be pure and good, and shall remain pure and good for ever. What manner of day shall that be whose glorious dawn is here revealed ?

**Come hither,** cried one of the angels, once a minister of wrath, but now the joyful revealer of nought but joys, **and I will show thee the Bride, the Lamb's wife.** When Satan strove to seduce Christ to sin, he took Him up into an exceeding high mountain, and showed Him thence all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them. Here, on the summons of the angel, St. John is likewise carried to a great and high mountain, a place commanding a wide and ample view, and there he beheld **the great and Holy City descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.** Why should we perplex ourselves in a vain endeavour to give a specific interpretation of every symbolic figure of dimension or of description which follows ? The terms used are such as baffle us even in the attempt to construct in the imagination a visualised picture. It suffices to learn, from the rich imagery before us, that the city is perfect in beauty and in strength, and is of vast capacity. The gates of pearl, the foundations of



precious jewels, the streets of shining gold,—these are Oriental emblems for magnificence; their present combination surpasses thought. The city lieth four-square, and the length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. Its circumference (so we read, v. 16) is twelve thousand furlongs. There may be a suggestion of completeness and symmetry in language which at first sight seems to present the similitude of a perfect cube; and such an interpretation would be in harmony with the symbolic use of numbers among the Jews. But perhaps a more probable rendering is that which portrays the city as covering a pyramidal mountain whose height is equal to the lineal measurement of one of its sides. If so, the thought is one equally suggestive of symmetry, but combining with this the idea of the utmost stability. It is a city that cannot be overturned. And it is compassed by a jasper wall of 144 cubits' thickness, a thickness thrice as great as those "broad walls of Babylon" of which Jeremiah predicted the fall (51<sup>53,44</sup>), even if the "measure of the angel" be no greater than that of a man. Moreover, at each of its gates stands an angel guard. Such are its sure defences.

The magnitude of such a city is beyond conception. If we must translate the figures



into measurements more familiar, we shall picture it as of a circumference of nearly 1,400 miles, an abundant habitation even for "a multitude which no man can number." Nations shall walk in the light of it (v.24), and, as if to perfect the representation of its freedom and capacity, we read that the gates of it shall not be shut at all. The kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. What new races may exist, to add to its glory and its exultant multitudes, we know not; but we may be forgiven if we picture to ourselves a continuing and boundless increase of the glorious fellowship which enters in through the gates into the city.

And this is the portrayal of the victorious Church of God. On the gates are written the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel; on the foundations, the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The Church of the old covenant and that of the new are united in a common salvation. Yet there was no temple therein. The words must have sounded strange to the ears of a race which was wont to think of Jerusalem as deriving all its glory from the shrine which symbolised the dwelling of God in the midst of His people. Naturally St. John looked for some central pile of architecture, more radiant than the pearly gates, or streets of



gold. But if there was a momentary surprise or disappointment at finding no such edifice, it quickly passed away. For he had heard a voice saying, Behold, the Shechinah of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God (v.3). It was a repetition of what he had seen and heard even in the first of these prophetic visions: "He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. . . . The Lamb . . . shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters" (7<sup>15, 17</sup>). The real glory of the temple was its symbolism of the Divine Presence, and now that Presence is made manifest everywhere. The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it . . . and the Lamb is the light thereof" (vv.22, 23). All the splendid scene is visible only by the sheen of the unveiled countenance of the King. The city had no need of a temple, nor of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it.

But we are little able to realise such a description of the positive glories of this picture. Our sense of delight is almost overpowered by our amazement. The words which tell us what we shall not find in that city are more intelligible, and come home to us far more closely. They speak of things which now we know only too well.



There shall be no sin there. Now it is on every side of us. It taints the very atmosphere we breathe. We must live constantly on the watch for its pitfalls; constantly in the use of remedies against its infection. We see around us no worldly force which even so much as tends to destroy it. We may see for a while vices partly neutralising vices,—pride conquering sloth, ambition subduing lust, culture exorcising brutality; but such conflicts bring no real victory. The soul which is swept and garnished is, or may become, the habitation of demons again. We have indeed near us a Deliverer, a Physician of souls who can save; but even so He takes us not out of the world. Here we are assured there is a rest prepared. Within those open gates “he that overcometh” shall hear the sound of battle nevermore.

There shall be no more sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain. Now for awhile, even as we sigh, we perceive the need of the discipline of sorrow. Tears have their beauty amidst the uncertain lights of the life which now is. But oh! the weariness, the burden of it! It is only hope, even the hope which this revelation sets before us, which can give the needful strength and fortitude to bear it. We can wait yet for a little season if we



can lift up eyes of confidence to the glory which shall be revealed. We have an inspiration which enables us to endure unto the end in the words: **God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.**

There shall be no more death. This is a consummation never dreamed of by the wisest philosophy of this world. It has been compelled to own the kingship of the last enemy. How desperately man has struggled against his power, sought a shelter from his dart, we well know, hunting in every nook of earth if peradventure he may find an elixir of life, vainly dipping in the Abana and Pharpar of science, while despising in his unbelief that Jordan whose water springs up into everlasting life. Death laughs at our hygiene, mocks our therapeutic art. The world is filled with tombs, which are his monuments. But even this "last enemy" shall have been destroyed before Christ shall deliver up the kingdom to His Father, that God may be all in all.

But perhaps some are asking, Where shall this better land be found? It is a child's enquiry; and we know that the childhood of the race, perhaps under the impulse of some dim reminiscence of a Paradise lost, imagined that somewhere in the world a realm or garden of



perfection might be discovered. Poets sang of the golden Hesperides, or suffered their imagination to revel in the glories of some spice-breathed clime, where the apples of Iduna should bestow an everlasting youth. But geography drove all such dreams away. It has mapped the globe from pole to pole, and everywhere found conflict and sin, sorrow and death. Then men cast their eyes above, and pictured to themselves a home of glory in the sun or in the stars. But astronomy finds no room for it in the sky. It tells us that the whole visible universe is growing old, the sun burning itself out, those cosmic forces which have moulded many heavenly systems being surely radiated away into the infinite abyss of space. The last word of science is a mournful prophecy of an ultimate and universal reign of Death; that he and none other shall put all enemies beneath his feet. Be it so of these worlds which now we see and wonder at. Let nature's jewellery lose its lustre. Let the visible creation wax old as doth a garment, and as a vesture be folded up and changed. The prediction accords with the sure word of prophecy: "The things which are seen are temporal" (2 Cor. 4:18); "We know we have no abiding city here." But He who sits in the heavens has said, "Behold, I make all things



new." We look, therefore, for no grey autumnal heaven strewn with mementoes of sin and woe, but for a land smiling in the radiance of eternal spring, "new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. 3 13).

It is indeed very striking that St. John speaks of the city of God as coming down from heaven to earth, rather than of the saints of earth ascending up to heaven; and there are words in his prophecy which seem to suggest a continuance or renewal of some such conditions as those which now characterize the government and life of this world; but it is vain for us to allow our imagination to dwell on such matters as these. These sayings may be significant of some of the realities of the life to come. But, on the other hand, they may be, so to speak, the framing of the picture, or illustrations of the inadequacy of human language to express the conditions of a transcendental existence. It is dangerous to deduce from them even such inferences as they may seem to warrant. Yet there is one thought which appears to be too clearly suggested to fall within this general caution. It rests on the contrast which is indicated between this Paradise restored and the Paradise of Eden. The one was a garden; the other is a city. It has, indeed, its trees, rich in fruit and foliage,



and its refreshing rivers; but the word itself speaks of a community of life, as contrasted with the isolation of the man and woman whose inspired life completed the work of the first creation.

There is promise in the thought that that instinct of the human heart which longs for reunion with the loved and lost, ay, and with all that have been noble and great in the glorious company of the apostles, the goodly fellowship of the prophets and the noble army of martyrs, will not be disappointed. The life of the triumphant Church will be a social life. Even as now in the warfare we are members one of another, so shall it be in the resurrection of the dead. The rapture of union with Christ will be enhanced by a restored companionship with those who, once having shared the toils of strife, then for ever share the joy and rest of victory. We have many hints in Scripture that that endless life will be filled with worthy and glad-some employment. What its nature will be we know not. There will be many things for us then to learn which now we cannot bear. But of this we are assured, that in all we shall be fellow-workers with our Lord: "They shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth"; "His servants shall serve Him day and night in His temple."

Naturally a chapter which expands such a



theme as this is full of comfortable words for such as have faith and hope of being partakers of these things. But there is a solemn significance in the fact that, even in the midst of this description, the prophet is constrained to resume more than once the tragic tone which so often characterizes his writings. He is careful to define for whom the promises are given. There is no universalism in his language. The city of God is vast, and encloses a multitude which no man can number, and it is "all glorious within." But even as we read of these things, we are reminded that there is a "without" as well as a within. In both of these concluding chapters St. John gives emphasis to the dreadful thought. **He that overcometh shall inherit all things (217).** But over against the happy victors there stands a wailing host,—the fearful, the unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear"; and let him note the inclusion of the "fearful" and the "unbelieving," together with the workers of what the world esteems more flagrant wickedness, in that doomed array. The fate of moral cowardice, of that mean spirit which, in spite of knowledge, dares not confess Christ before men, and the fate of that heedlessness which refuses to listen



to the words of the God of truth, is one with the fate of those who defy the Commandments of the First and Second Tables. All must have their part in the lake which burneth. In the twenty-second chapter, at the very conclusion of the whole matter, the same thought recurs in another form. In the Authorised Version we read: **Blessed are they that keep His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life; and they shall enter in through the gates into the city.** The Revised Version, adopting a more accurate text, has a more evangelical and, may we not venture to say, a more welcome sound: **Blessed are they that have washed their robes.** "The redeemed shall walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion" (Isa. 35<sup>9, 10</sup>). Doubtless either phrase might be used to describe the same class; but the sinner rejoices to hear words which recall the memory of that "fountain opened for sin and uncleanness," to whose cleansing power he ascribes all his hope and all his joy. But as before the victors were contrasted with the cowards, so here the washed are contrasted with the wilfully unclean: **Without are the dogs, the workers of iniquity, and every one that loveth and maketh a lie. There shall enter therein nothing that defileth.**



## CHAPTER X.

### CONCLUSION.

(Ch. 22 6-21.)

IN his exordium to this wonderful work, the seer described it as "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," and the description was quickly justified by a glorious epiphany of the Saviour in all the radiance of His risen life, arrayed as the High Priest of His people, and as "the Prince of the kings of the earth." Throughout the whole course of the varied revealing visions, the throne of God, "set in heaven," has, as it were, been visible to our eyes, girt with the rainbow, surrounded by the multitude of the heavenly host, evermore giving praise to the great Three in One; and out of the throne have proceeded many thunderings and voices, as scene after scene of human history has been symbolically portrayed.

Now, at the close a voice again speaks, and it



is the same which startled the seer in the first of these visions. Then the words were: "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore" (1 17, 18). Now, as the door of heaven again closes, and the prophet finds himself left alone amidst the barren rocks of his island prison, a last message reached him: **Behold, I come quickly . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and end** (22 12, 13). I Jesus sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright and **Morning Star** (v. 16). Reading these words together, we can have no doubt of the great purpose of the book. Even if doubt were otherwise possible, the seer himself removes it by his opening and concluding sentences. After the salutation which prefaces the work, he cries: "Behold, He cometh with clouds." With the same thought he closes: "**The Spirit and the Bride say, Come.**" Whatever may be our perplexity as to the meaning of many of the mysteries, the exhortation based thereon is surely like to this: "When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh (Luke 21 28).



We have said that it is natural to suppose that the Church of St. John's day was endangered and troubled by the temptation which whispered, "The Lord seeth not: He hath forsaken the earth." Its urgent need, amidst distresses and calamities unforeseen and hard to be understood, was some thought, some knowledge from above, which should be a sufficient inspiration for heroic labour and heroic patience. The answer to its prayer is before us in this apocalypse, which we may compare to a splendid symphony in many movements, whose pervading themes are the watchful care and the conquering majesty of Christ. Now its music is soothing and pathetic; now it rises in immense chords of voluminous harmony: at times we are almost overpowered with crashing and mysterious discords, and forthwith these give place to strains of heavenly beauty. But in every varying mood the message is Divine. There is the Hallelujah chorus which cries, "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth," and the funeral anthem which proclaims the blessedness of the dead in Christ; the thundering overthrow of Babylon, the song of Moses and the Lamb: but every note celebrates either the power or the love of God in Christ.

For the first generation which it addressed, what could be more apt and rich with consola-



tion ? At the same time, what lessons are more universally impressive ? It may well be that in times of the Church's peace, and the lethargy which too often attends such times, there will be a disposition to neglect a revelation so full of mysterious energy and force. If now we behold an age in which the hearts of many are fearful and troubled, while multitudes around live lives of slothful ease,—when the many are ready to say, “Where is the promise of His coming ?” while the few see no hope for the confusion of the world save in His coming,—surely now the words of this prophecy are living words: “The Spirit and the Bride say, Come”; and as the terror of that supplicated Advent is realised, so will the prayer be attended by a passionate cry to the imperilled multitudes around: **Let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.** Verily this generation sorely needs to be stamped with the twofold thought which runs through every page of this book: **Behold, I come quickly.** “Lo ! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age.” “Though the vision tarry, wait for it; for it will surely come, and not tarry” (Hab. 23).



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